

report

OAD-CR-155

Indochina Refugee Authored Monograph Program

*The Royal Lao Army and
U.S. Army Advice and Support*

By

Oudone Sananikone

Major General, RLA

Prepared For:

*Department of the Army
Office of Chief of Military History
Forrestal Building
12th and Independence Ave, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20314*

7 November 1978

Contract No. MDA 903-76-C-0172

**GENERAL
RESEARCH**



CORPORATION

7655 Old Springhouse Road, McLean, Virginia 22101

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A SUBSIDIARY OF FLOW GENERAL INC.

7655 Old Springhouse Road, McLean, Virginia 22102

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Preface

The Royal Lao Army was authorized in 1948 soon after the Kingdom of Laos adopted its first constitution, elected its first national assembly and installed a new government. In the years that followed, my country and the Royal Lao Army played major roles in the Indochina Wars as North Vietnam endeavored to expand her area of influence south into the Republic of Vietnam and Cambodia.

This monograph presents significant events concerning the origins of the Royal Lao Army; the transition from the French system to the American system of military logistics, training, administration and operations; the evolution of United States Army advice and support to include accomplishments and problems; the impact of the 1973 cease-fire; the decline of the Royal Lao Army; and the final days in my country as the Communists gained control.

During this period I had the privilege and responsibility of serving my country in several significant military and governmental assignments, to be a representative in our negotiations with the Communists and the opportunity to work closely with representatives of the United States Army. Based on this experience and as former Chief of Staff of the RLA and the last Under Secretary of Defense for our Armed Forces, I have reconstructed events as far as possible from my personal involvement and memory. Additionally, I have obtained valuable information during interviews with knowledgeable persons.

I wish to express my personal appreciation to Ms. Pham Thi Bong. Ms. Bong, a former Captain in the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces and

currently serving as secretary for the Indochina Refugee Authored Monograph Program, has devoted long hours typing, editing and in the administrative preparation of my manuscript in final form.

McLean, Virginia
7 November 1978

Oudone Sananikone
Major General, RLA

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Not until the middle of this century did the people that inhabit the central Mekong River valley of Indochina become united into a modern nation-state, and that state, the Kingdom of Laos, has now passed into history. At the time of this writing, the king, deposed by the Lao Communists, lives a prisoner in the remote northeastern region of the country, far from his ancient capital, Luang Prabang. In former days, the king's ancestors ruled the feudal society as military leaders whose right to rule and power derived from their proven courage and skill on the field of battle. The kings were always expected to be in the vanguard, to be exposed to the hazards of combat and the turbulent history of the kingdom is filled with instances of kings at war, for the small nation was surrounded by aggressive, hostile neighbors. It was often invaded, looted, dominated and forced to pay tribute to foreign kings whose courts were in various times in China, Burma, Siam, Annam and Cambodia. So the people of Laos have a long military tradition whose army is descended from ancient warriors who followed their kings into battle.

For about a thousand years, beginning early in the eighth century, the kingdom which eventually became known as Laos, was governed by its monarchs with varying degrees of independence, and during these centuries maintained its own defenses. But this changed when, late in the nineteenth century, the French came to central Indochina. In 1893, France solidified its growing influence in Laos by sending a military expedition that occupied Luang Prabang, Vientiane and other towns and Laos became a "protectorate" of France. From then until the turmoil caused by World War II, Laos had no army of its own; its security was the responsibility of France. (*Map 1*)

Map 1 – General Map of Laos



The French provided the police for the internal security of the main towns and the leadership for the small local militia whose mission was to guard the French administrators and secure the prisons. The French maintained only one small garrison in northeast Laos under the command of a French captain who reported to the French command in Hanoi. The center of authority, military and civil, was in Hanoi, and the French employed vietnamese in civil as well as military functions throughout Indochina. Very few Lao were allowed any part in governmental affairs and none at all were recruited into the French forces until 1941. Many Lao chafed under the harsh French rule, the complete absence of freedom in their country, and the exclusion of Lao citizens from participation in their own government.

As a student in the French high school in Vientiane I learned about the French devotion to "liberte, egalite and fraternite" but observed that this honorable tradition did not apply outside the school room. For example, as in the rest of Indochina, the common means of transportation on the streets of Vientiane was the pedicab, a three-wheeled cycle; in the Vientiane version, the passenger sat on an open seat beside the driver. It somehow exceeded the French sense of "liberte" for a Lao to sit comfortably with legs crossed while being pedalled across town — this relaxed posture was reserved for the French — and this offense would bring a clout on the head from the French gendarme. Inevitably, French oppression fostered dissidence and I joined many of my fellow students in a movement, which later was to become known as Lao Issara (Free Laos), whose ultimate goal was the restoration of self-government in our country.

The French, of course, did their utmost to destroy the independence movements in Indochina and the participants in the Laos movement, and their counterparts in Vietnam and Cambodia, experienced the full force of French repression and retaliation if caught. We had to be very careful to disguise our activities on behalf of the movement for the place favored by the French for incarceration of political activists was the infamous Con Son (Poulo Condore) Island prison off the southern coast of Vietnam and many Lao nationalists suffered there.

I was in the tenth grade when the opportunity to translate our desires for independence and theories of government into action appeared to be at hand. It was 1939. France had capitulated to Germany and the Vichy Government succeeded to authority over the French dominions in Indochina. Perceiving weakness in the French ability to preserve the empire, Thailand renewed its assertion of sovereignty over four provinces - Sayaboury and Champassak in Laos, and two in northwestern Cambodia. Sayaboury was on the west bank of the Mekong opposite Luang Prabang and Champassak was on the west bank in the far south. The French were not as impotent as the Thais expected. They reacted swiftly by sending units of their Hanoi-based army to the border towns along the Mekong and even challenged the Thais with a small group of armed motorboats that raided Nong Khai opposite Vientiane. Working as a volunteer in the Vientiane hospital I saw the bodies of four of the French Navy men who had been killed in this foray. The Thais retaliated with a bombing raid on Vientiane and fired artillery on the city from across the river but caused little damage.

While these border clashes were going on, the people of Laos were being treated to their first contact with foreign troops in sizeable numbers, and these troops were almost all Vietnamese from north and central Vietnam. They treated the Lao with contempt and cruelty, looting, robbing and otherwise mistreating the citizens. Their French officers and non-coms showed no interest in controlling them. There were numerous clashes between students and soldiers in Vientiane and of course the students came out second best. Later, after the trouble with Thailand cooled off and despite the rough treatment anticipated from French mercenaries, many young Lao responded to a French recruiting drive and left school to join the French Union Army. This was the first time the French had permitted Lao to put on the uniform and this fact in itself had great appeal among many of our unsophisticated youth.

By the winter of 1939 French security was so tight in Vientiane and the other major towns that it became impossible to organize any effective resistance movement from within Laos. Therefore, together with 50 or 60 of my classmates and associates, I resolved to become an exile in Thailand

and there to work toward Lao independence. Because Vientiane had been under Thai administration before the French took over in 1893, and my grandfather had been the deputy administrator of the province for the Thai government, I had status as a Thai citizen. I would not be a stranger in Thailand and I could speak and read the language almost as well as my own after a few efforts.

While serving as an aide in the Vientiane hospital, I used my position there to assist in my escape. I obtained permission to visit the town of Ban Phon Hong, about 40 miles north of Vientiane, to work in the medical dispensary there. Wearing my Red Cross armband, I and a fellow student were able to pass through French security on Route 13 and to bicycle up to Ban Phon Hong. Once there, we dodged the security forces and headed southwest on foot along jungle trails. We walked for a day and a half and finally reached the Mekong River. There we engaged a boatman to row us across to Thailand. He didn't want to do it, for although the river was only 300 meters wide, it was running very swiftly. Furthermore, the crossing would have to be made at night to avoid the French patrols that would fire on any boat that approached the Thai shore. But we were two and he was one and under duress, he took the job. It was a perilous crossing but we made it, paid the boatman, and walked to the nearest Thai hamlet. The hamlet chief escorted us to the local police authorities and they drove us to Nong Khai. This began my first exile in Thailand and it was to last nearly five years.

Although publicly restrained, the Thai government was sympathetic to our cause. After all, they had long opposed the French suzerainty over Laos and were supportive of any movement that would cause the French discomfort. Furthermore, the Thais always regarded the central Mekong Valley as Thai country; it was inhabited by people of similar culture and language and had for many years been under the administration of Bangkok. So we were warmly received in Thailand and in our temporary quarters at Nong Khai. Shortly many of us moved to Bangkok where we established the headquarters of the Lao Issara. I became one of the members of the information group for the movement and later enrolled in Chulalongkon University as a journalism student. Although we received

some help from the Thai government, we all had to work to support ourselves.

Similar independence movements were growing in other parts of French Indochina - in Vietnam and Cambodia. Meanwhile, the Japanese invaded Southeast Asia and the government of Thailand decided that its best course was to ally itself with Japan. We continued our political movement in Bangkok, for the time was not yet ripe to try to return to Vientiane. Our quarrel was not with the Japanese but with the remaining French controlled regime.¹

While Oun Sananikone, my cousin and one of the leaders of Lao Issara, and a group of his followers began training in weapons and guerrilla tactics in northeastern Thailand, I began preparing for our return to Laos, making contact with our sympathizers that remained in Vientiane. With my base of operations in Udon Thani, I frequently visited Nong Khai and, surreptitiously, Vientiane. I had the misfortune to be summoned twice by Japanese security officials and had it not been for the help of a former classmate—who happened to be a Vietnamese working for the Japanese administration—I surely would have been executed.

By 1944, the tide of war had begun to turn against Japan and this fact did not go unnoticed in Thailand. In the dead of night, a group of men from the Thai anti-Japanese underground came to our lodgings in Bangkok and took us secretly to a rendezvous north of Korat. Here, I was later introduced to the first American I had ever seen - Jim Thompson of

1

Pursuant to a Franco-Lao treaty, a native Lao government was proclaimed in August 1941; it was called the government of the Kingdom of Luang Prabang. The Viceroy was Prince Tiao Phetsarath, an older brother to Souvanna Phouma and Souphanouvong. The cabinet included Tiao Sestha, a brother to the king, Tiao Souvannarath, another brother of Souvanna Phouma, Outhong Souvannavong, a high functionary from Vientiane who had close ties with the king, and Phouy Panya, a high functionary from a Luang Prabang family. The French retained control of defense, internal security and foreign affairs.

the OSS who had parachuted in to support the Thai resistance movement against the Japanese. He brought money and weapons to our Thai friends, and they encouraged us — the Lao Issara — to seize this opportunity to arm ourselves.

At this time there were still two opposing factions in the politics of Thailand. Marshal Phibul Songgram was the prime minister. Shortly after he had dramatically announced that Thailand's soldiers would fight to the death to repel any aggressor, the Japanese moved swiftly and unopposed to occupy several regions, even sending a column of trucks with flanged wheels up the railroad from southern Thailand into Bangkok. Overnight Marshal Phibul Songgram reversed his government's position and pledged to cooperate with the invaders. But the prime minister's Bangkok dominated government was not without opposition in this stand. Its major opposition came from a group headed by Dr. Pridi Phnom Yong, a distinguished lawyer who had been a close associate of Phibul during the 1935 *coup* that installed Phibul's military faction in the government. Dr. Pridi was president of the king's council and he had established clandestine contact with the Allies even before Phibul declared the alliance with Japan. With covert Allied assistance, Dr. Pridi formed an anti-Axis armed guerrilla force. The chief of this force in northeast Thailand was Tieng Sirikhan, who was the senator from Sakol Nakorn Province. It was Tieng's group that contacted us in Bangkok and transported us to the northeast in government rucks through Japanese units who were working Allied prisoners of war along the road. Because he was from the northeast, Tieng Sirikhan and we had understood each other's language and attitudes very well. While his motivation was to assist the Allies in the defeat of Japan and rid Thailand of the Japanese Army, he understood that our objective was two-fold: to assist in the defeat of the Japanese, but also to eliminate French colonialism in our country. Therefore, while OSS support was initially totally devoted to the Thai underground in its war against the Japanese, the OSS approved when Tieng's group began sharing this support with us.

After a long period of training, my cousin Oun Sananikone took his small guerrilla force to Savannakhet and there they began, in a very small

way, the war of independence against France. In a way, this small group of guerrillas under Oun Sananikone could be considered a rebirth of the Lao Army, but as we shall see later, it was not destined to survive the return of French colonialism to Indochina. In any event, brave, dedicated and determined as they were, Oun's men had much less to do with the demise of French authority in Laos than did the Japanese who entered the Mekong Valley in force when the Vichy Government collapsed in France. The Japanese conducted a brutal massacre of the French whom they trapped in Thakhek. The French forces that managed to escape withdrew into the jungles, into China and elsewhere. The time was approaching when we would be able to establish our own government in Vientiane for the first time since the French began "protecting" us fifty years before.

After driving the French out of Laos, the Japanese proclaimed that colonialism by Europeans was at an end in Asia and that self-determination would be the rule for the states of the region.

I returned to my native land and to my home in Vientiane late in 1944, accompanied by the young men who were the political nucleus of Lao Issara, and there we began working on the final preparations to govern our own country. On 12 October 1945 we proclaimed our independence from France and established our government in Vientiane; I was in charge of information for the group in Vientiane, the same post I had held in Lao Issara.

We hastily began organizing our defenses, for we knew that the French would oppose us. They were already recruiting Lao soldiers in the countryside, anticipating a battle to regain their authority. Likewise, we recruited soldiers to our cause and shortly Lao men from the same villages, the same families, would find themselves in battle against one another.

Sing Rattanasamay, a former officer in the militia, became our first minister of defense, assisted by his deputy, Tham Sayasith Sena. We organized four or five battalions in and around the capital city while in Luang Prabang a few more were activated by the independence group there. In Thakhek, Prince Souphanouvong, assisted by a staff of Vietnamese, sent by Ho Chi Minh, commanded a few battalions and down at

Savannakhet, Oun Sananikone and Phoumi Nosavan organized some battalions from their own resources. This was our army as it prepared to resist the return of the French. We had only light infantry weapons, no artillery, little experience and incomplete training. Our few officers and non-coms had undergone some training in Thailand and some had served in the Lao militia, but resources were not adequate for the task ahead.

We would soon find ourselves opposing a French-led force of our own countrymen whose military training and experience were not even as great as ours. Furthermore, our opponents would not be driven by the high sense of purpose and dedication to the cause of independence that we were. Nevertheless, the French had the money, weapons, uniforms, equipment and ammunition that we did not.

Our support from outside dwindled to nothing when the OSS support was cut off and the U.S. acquiesced to the return of French control in Indochina. The army had to be paid and we had to find a way to pay for the other functions of the government too. Our first plan was to visit the national bank — a French institution — in Vientiane and confiscate the funds there in the name of the government. I was a member of the party of armed officials who approached the bank one morning, demanded entrance, and forced the manager to open the vault. Unfortunately, we found only a few thousand Indochinese piastres; not nearly enough for our purposes. In the end the government had to resort to the simple but inflationary device of printing banknotes but our early revolutionary expedient in fiscal management brought no great economic calamity upon our country. In fact, it had practically no impact on the people at all, for the French were about to return in force and wipe out what little our new government had accomplished.

Highly trained French commandos — all officers — were the first to appear as they parachuted into the remote regions around Vientiane. Amply supplied with hard money and weapons, they succeeded in rapidly forming battalions of poor local youths, training them, and preparing to attack our positions around Vientiane. We fought many hard battles around our capital but in the end had to give way in the face of superior numbers and firepower. The French marched back into Vientiane on

24 April 1946 and our government fled to exile in Nong Khai and later moved to Bangkok. Once again it was my destiny to leave my home in order to persist in the struggle for a free and independent Laos. Meanwhile, our forces in Thakhek and Savannakhet continued the resistance inside Laos and moved up to Vientiane in a final effort to prevent the return of French control.

About this time the French realized that it would be difficult if not impossible to return the old autocratic colonial regime to Laos. Troubled by independence movements throughout their empire, they decided to grant Laos the status of an independent state within the French Union. This process was to move step-by-step until Laos would eventually be in control of its own armed forces and foreign relations. As the first event in the evolution from colony to free nation, in 1947 a constitutional assembly was convened in Vientiane. Its members were appointed by a committee of delegates elected by universal suffrage from every province of the country and by 1948 the constitution was completed. The first national assembly was elected and the government of Boun Oum installed. In an effort to bring peace and harmony to the country, the new Royal Lao Government, with the approval of the national assembly, announced a general amnesty for all Lao who had fought for independence against the king and against France.

We exiles in Thailand greeted this new situation with mixed feelings. There were long and heated debates among our leaders, and while they argued in Bangkok, many of our compatriots were still fighting the French-led forces in southern Laos. Eventually, the issue became simply this: do we accept the reality that the French have already succumbed and given us what we have been fighting for — independence — or should we refuse to cooperate with the French-installed regime and insist on a pure Lao Issara government? To pursue the latter course would mean continuing the struggle until we would drive the French from our soil by force of arms. Our group of Lao nationalists was hopelessly divided. Led by Phagna Khammao and key leaders of Lao Issara, one element was for returning to Vientiane in order to take part in the formation and operation of the new government. I was in this faction. I felt we had won

our struggle and as common people who were more than any others responsible for the success of the independence movement, we should return and demand the right to participate in the government of our country. We had been exiled too long, and should return to our land to strengthen and preserve our new independence and to enjoy the benefits of freedom for which we had fought.

The other faction, whose leader was Souphanouvong, would not agree. Perhaps Souphanouvong was too bitter toward the French. He was a very highly qualified civil engineer who could not forgive the degrading treatment he had experienced as a civil servant of the French in Vietnam where he was never permitted to follow properly his profession. In late 1945, Souphanouvong had had a narrow escape as he fled from Thakhek. The French strafed his boat as he crossed the Mekong and he was seriously wounded. There is also no doubt that Souphanouvong was strongly influenced by his Vietnamese staff of Viet Minh. Even his wife was a Viet Minh militant. Rather than participate with the new government of Laos, which he considered still under French domination, he took his group to North Vietnam where they enjoyed the protection of the Viet Minh.

In the summer of 1949, we returned once again to Vientiane. Phoui Sananikone was speaker of the assembly and Boun Oum Na Champassak was prime minister. I was offered the post of director of the national assembly bureaus. In late 1949 Phoui succeeded Boun Oum as prime minister and my position as director was no longer secure. For that reason, when a new opportunity was presented, I was happy to seize it. This came in the spring of that year when Kou Voravong, the minister of defense, persuaded the French military command that the former members of the Lao Issara who had returned from Thailand could really be trusted and should be given a chance to prove themselves as responsible subjects of the new government. The French were dubious about this but nevertheless agreed to a test of Kou Voravong's theory.

Accordingly, I was among a group of about 100 Lao Issara members living in the Vientiane area who were recruited to form a guerrilla force to eliminate our own former comrades who were still holding out in Champassak Province. This should be a supreme test of our loyalty,

at least in French eyes. We were joined by other former Lao Issara members until we numbered about 300, whereupon the French augmented this force with another 300 Lao who were serving in the French Union Army. The French also sent along a French major to supervise, an added precaution, and we were flown to Pakse in the civil airline DC-3s to organize, get our weapons and equipment, and train.

I was placed in charge of political indoctrination for this force because of my experience in that field. We trained in weapons and guerrilla tactics for about three months and then took the field against our former comrades in Champassak. It was a hard campaign; the fighting continued day and night, but after three months we accomplished our mission. Champassak was clear of rebels and we were recalled to Vientiane.

We had proven ourselves and some of us were promptly offered commissions in the new National Army. By royal decree, I became a second lieutenant. At the same time, the first graduates of the officer candidate school appeared and 20 or 30 of them became aspirants in the National Lao Army. Our commissioning, in effect, marked a new beginning for the Lao Army for until then the only Lao men in uniform were serving in the French Union Army. But now we had our own uniforms, although in the beginning nearly all command and staff positions were held by French officers and non-coms. For example, our two original battalions were commanded by a French major and a French captain and all companies as well as most squads were under French command. A few Lao officers and non-coms serving in the French Union Army transferred permanently to the new National Lao Army, while others, not confident of the future of the new regime, merely agreed to be detached for service, keeping their status as members of the French Union Army and enjoying the benefits of its administration and promotion policies.

Many of our soldiers were recruited from the countryside where the uneducated young men viewed the army as a means to gain status and adventure. Additionally, an amazingly large number of our soldiers — and officers as well — came from the Lao Issara nationalist army that had fought against the French. They now joined their fellow Lao who had been their enemies in the French Union Army.

Thus the modern Lao Army was born out of the chaos following World War II. Partly a creation of dedicated Lao nationalists —who themselves were (as events would later prove) hopelessly split on how Laos should be governed and how it should conduct its foreign relations — and partly a creation of the French colonialists who sought an end to turmoil in Laos so that they could concentrate on defeating the Viet Minh in Vietnam. So it was natural that the French would assume the responsibility for equipping and training the infant NLA. To perform these functions, the French government sent to Laos a military mission. How this mission organized and shaped the NLA is covered in the next chapter.

CHAPTER II

Origins of the Royal Lao Army

French Military Missions

In accordance with the agreement with France that permitted the establishment of the Lao Government, France retained the authority and responsibility for the organization and training of the National Lao Army. Therefore, just after the creation of the new government, a group of about 40 officers and 60 non-coms arrived in Vientiane from France to begin this task. This was the "Mission Militaire Francaise pres le Gouvernement Royal Laos"—MMF/GRL—under the command of Major Dotton Lewyeski, a French officer of Polish descent. The MMF/GRL was shortly followed by another smaller group—about 25 officers and men—whose mission was to organize and train the military police.¹ This was the "Mission d'Organization de la Gendarmerie Royale."

As stated earlier, Phoui Sananikone, who was one of my cousins, was prime minister at this time (1950) and he held as well the portfolio of minister of defense. Nevertheless, he did not exercise command over the army. The MMF/GRL effectively commanded the army, and the MMF/GRL chief reported to the French military headquarters in Vientiane, which in turn reported to the French military command in Hanoi. So, although we had a new National Lao Army, it was still under French command. The French also placed members of the MMF/GRL in the offices of the prime minister and in the department of defense. French influence was therefore pervasive throughout the government.

¹The Gendarmerie in the French tradition were the elite troops of the army. They were first in the column in all parades and, unlike American MPs, had the authority to make civil as well as military arrests.

My opportunity to gain first-hand experience with the French high command in Laos came about quite unexpectedly in 1952. Since 1950 I had been a second lieutenant, deputy commanding officer of the 5th Company, 1st Infantry Battalion, on a remote outpost situated on the rim of the mountains that enclose the plain of Vientiane, about 70 miles north of the capital, when my company commander, Captain Amkha Soukhavong, told me that the Lao high command directed that I report to Vientiane for duty with the ministry of defense. I arrived in the capital two days later and reported to the office of the minister of defense, but instead of being escorted in to see the minister, I was told by the French officer on duty there that I would be put to work in the office of the commander of the French forces in Laos, the Forces Terrestres du Laos (FTL). I was very surprised to learn this and was not certain what would happen next. In any case, I reported to the office of the commander, Colonel Redon, and became a member of his personal staff. I also learned why he considered it necessary to have me in his office. It seems that he had recently been visited by an important official of the Government of Laos, whose identity had been confused by the Colonel's sergeant in the office. The sergeant had mistakenly sent the Lao official away; the insult was embarrassing to all and the Colonel had to apologize for the gaffe. Therefore, it became my primary duty to be the Colonel's secretary and liaison officer for all contacts with Lao officials and government offices. I also accompanied him on many field trips around the country, even to Lai Chau and Dien Bien Phu in North Vietnam.

Officers of the MMF/GRL were daily visitors to the headquarters FTL and it was obvious to me that Colonel Redon was the ultimate military authority in Laos.

Through its influence over the gendarmerie, the Mission d'Organisation de la Gendarmerie Royale was the law and order authority in the army and was also influential with the civil police.

The MMF/GRL was organized with a staff similar to any French field unit and had, in addition, a sub-staff for administration — the "Centre Administratif" — which contained the finance and supply functions. Conscious

of the fact that they had not integrated any Lao officers into the staff that was running the Lao Army, the Lao government tried to remedy this situation by commissioning a civilian provincial governor - Sounthone Patthammavong - and placing him in the MMF/GRL headquarters. Colonel Patthammavong had no function there except to observe and try to learn how the French staff operated. He had had some experience with the French Army during the Japanese occupation and he later became commander-in-chief of the National Lao Army.

Many of the members of the MMF/GRL had served in Laos for many years as officers in the French Union Army. One of them, for example, Captain Matieu, had served for at least eight years as company commander in the southern part of the country and he enjoyed a very close personal relationship with the former prime minister, Prince Boun Oum Na Champassak. He was detailed as military expert in the office of the prime minister.

Over the months as the NLA increased rapidly in size, the number of French officers and non-coms attached to it also increased. All of them belonged to that element of the French Army called "Troupe Coloniale" and had served in various French colonial commands. Others were green, young officers recently graduated from school and these were less equipped to teach us than to learn from us.

In the beginning one of the many problems that bothered the French missions was the technical ineptitude of the Lao recruit. While I was working in the French headquarters, members of the mission would often consult me about the difficulties they were having training Lao soldiers to become drivers and mechanics. I tried to explain that most of the recruits who volunteered for service were not from the brightest segment of our population, but that nevertheless, there were many intelligent, trainable soldiers among them and that patience with their slow adaptation to modern technology would bring the desired results. Just to tease him, I reminded Captain Matieu that I had read somewhere in a French military journal about the problems they had experienced trying to turn French peasants into *poilus*. One of the more common difficulties involved the peasants' inability to tell left from right. The French instructors solved

this by tying a piece of straw to one of the recruit's wrists and a piece of wood to the other. Commands to turn were given as "straw" or "wood" until the soldier learned to associate the directions with left and right. In case the new recruits came from regions other than the farming country, the French instructors had to use materials other than straw and wood to get the idea across, but the principle was the same. You begin with the familiar and you progress gradually to the unfamiliar.

Many of the men of the new National Lao Army came from the villages throughout the country and most of them were unsophisticated country peasants. Other had served in the French Union Army and had some previous training and experience. Some officers and NCOs had also served with the French, while still others were veterans of the Lao Issara fighting forces. The political reliability of the former Lao Issara members, so far as the French were concerned, was questionable. This was the subject of many heated discussions and deep misunderstandings between the French MMF/GRL and the Lao officers during the period.

French military doctrine was, of course, applied throughout our military system. Even the military language was French; all commands, drills and orders were in French. French was the language used in all our schools such as the officers school at Dong Hene and the NCO schools at Pakse and Vientiane. Although there were a few Lao officers and non-coms on the school staffs, they had little to do with instruction. All instructors were French and this was true at the training centers as well.

In the French designed training program, only basic, fundamental military training was taught. No courses, for example, were given in special operations since this was not considered essential by the MMF/GRL. Certain newly graduated Lao officers were, however, given the opportunity to attend technical schools in France. I participated in an orientation program at Saint Cyr and was there with 10 fellow Lao officers when our visit was cut short by the 1953 Viet Minh invasion of Laos.

Other young Lao officers were admitted to study at the full courses offered by the French military school system. The first Lao officers to attend the regular course at the Ecole Militaire (staff school) were

Kouprasith Abhay and Bounthieng Venevongsos. Officers were chosen for attendance at the French schools on the basis of merit. For example, Bounthieng and Kouprasith were ranked first and second, respectively, in their graduating class at the Lao Army OCS. Attendance at the technical schools was on the same basis, and the first officers to attend the quartermaster, ordnance, signal and other such courses almost invariably returned to Laos to be instructors in those fields and eventually to be chiefs of the corresponding services in the Lao Army. Of course, the Lao Government had no funds of its own for educating its officers in France, so all expenses were covered by the French Government. Our officers were paid at the same scale as French officers and enjoyed the same privileges while in France.

By 1952, the French began expanding the courses offered in France and included training for our young air force and river flotilla. Air cadets were sent to the French Air Academy and a few non-coms and officers attended the French Navy School. This latter training turned out to be not very appropriate to the needs of the Lao armed forces. While our water-borne force consisted entirely of river craft on the Mekong, the French trained our non-coms and officers aboard a large cruiser.

Inside Laos, the MMF/GRL gradually added technical courses to the training centers and NCO schools, such as medical technician, signal operator and repairman, driver and mechanic. The instructors were still French and of course all instruction and texts were in the French language. A staff and command school was established in Vientiane, the Military Institution of Higher Learning. It offered two distinct courses, each one year in length. One was the staff school which was designed for the well educated Saint Cyr or OCS graduate who was equipped to understand the more technical aspects of the military arts. Most of the students were captains and majors who were selected on merit and with reference to their specific assignments. The other course was offered by the command school. This course was for the senior officers, majors to colonels, who had not had the benefit of formal military education while they were junior officers. It was designed to allow them to catch up with their better trained contemporaries and subordinates.

The Early Years of the National Lao Army

The first NLA units organized by the MMF/GRL in 1950 were the 1st Infantry Battalion in Vientiane and the 2d Infantry Battalion in Pakse. I was posted to the 1st Battalion as deputy commander of the 5th Company, which was commanded by a Lao 1st Lieutenant who was detached from the French Union Army. The battalion commanders were a French captain and a French major and all companies were commanded by French or Lao officers of the French Union Army. A few Lao officers and NCOs commanded platoons and squads. Those who were detached from the French Union Army retained their French uniform and insignia and overlooked few opportunities to demonstrate how superior they were to their Lao brethren in the NLA.

While such problems did not exist at the higher echelons, disputes, misunderstandings and quarrels were frequent in the battalions and companies. Lao officers who had served with French units shared the French superior attitude toward the Lao officers and soldiers who had never belonged to the FUA. Furthermore, the Lao who had served with the French had become accustomed to being treated as inferior, even though equal or even superior in rank, by the French officers and non-coms. But the Lao veterans of the Lao Issara, and the newly commissioned reserve officers from civil life, would not gracefully accept such treatment. They had graduated from high school, at least, and some had held important positions in the civil service. Their knowledge of the French language was far better than that of their elders who had transferred from the French Union Army. They were a proud, intelligent group and they should have been treated with understanding, but they were not, and they resented the coarse, rough language used by the French officers and non-coms.

Combat experience for the new battalions began very soon after their organization. I was in the field fighting the Viet Minh and former Lao Issara around Vientiane almost continually during 1951. The Viet Minh had an arsenal near Ban Thieng, about 100 miles north of Vientiane, and this was one of our objectives. We were never successful in capturing it, however.

In 1953, the French authorized the formation of eight more battalions. The French forces were heavily engaged in Vietnam against the Viet Minh and wanted the National Lao Army to assume more of the burden of defense and operating against the Viet Minh in Laos. Two of these new battalions were "Bataillon Infanterie Lao" (BIL) and six were smaller units called "Bataillon Leger Lao" (BLL) — light infantry. Civilians were recruited to be officers in the new battalions, given three months training, and commissioned. For a brief period in 1953, following the Viet Minh invasion, I was posted to the Reserve Officers Candidate School at Pakse as an instructor.

The deep-seated resentment toward the French frequently erupted in fights during this period when these young Lao officers discovered that their new status suddenly put them on equal footing with French officers of the same rank. They would no longer accept abuse from the French officers. Discipline suffered in the units as disagreements between Lao and French officers broke out. There should have been a joint committee established at headquarters where calmer heads from both sides could have investigated those incidents and remedied some of the sources of the difficulties. Unfortunately, this was not done. When a fight took place and a report about it reached the MMF/GRL, the Lao officer involved was usually transferred, reduced in grade, or had his promotion delayed. It was rare that a French officer was disciplined in any way.

Another situation developed that caused even more resentment and conflict between the NLA and forces of the French Union Army. While the French authorized the formation of the new Lao battalions, they also were engaged in trying to recruit more Lao into the French Union Army. The competition between the two armies for recruits became bitter and eventually erupted in violence. In their effort to discourage young Lao from enlisting in the NLA, some Lao officers in the French Union Army incited their soldiers to beat up the Lao recruits in the NLA camps. These incidents became so frequent and so serious that the Lao Government eventually complained to the French high command in Vientiane. Despite this, however, harassments of the Lao recruits in the NLA continued until the end of the First Indochina War when the Geneva Treaties required the French forces to leave Laos.

During the first three years of the NLA's existence, the opportunities for command and advancement for Lao officers were very few. All companies and battalions were under French command and very few Lao officers were qualified in anything other than infantry. Each operational mission was planned by the FTL staff, was approved by the colonel commanding the FTL, and was supervised by the French sub-sector commandant. At no echelon above battalion level could any Lao commander or staff acquire any training or experience in operational planning or execution.

During the first four years of the NLA's existence, when its units operated side-by-side with elements of the French Union Army, our people could see a remarkable difference in the attitudes and conduct of the Lao soldiers who served in these two distinct armies.

The French had begun recruiting Lao men for the French Union Army shortly after the brief border war with Thailand. They first organized, in 1941, two companies of infantry which they called Compagnies des Chasseurs Laotiens (CCL). These were later developed into battalions (BCL) but the expansion of the Lao force of the French Union Army was interrupted by the Japanese. As mentioned earlier, however, French officers parachuted into Laos following the Japanese capitulation and began recruiting more Lao men to rebuild the BCLs for the French Union Army.

By 1951, or thereabouts, there were eight Bataillons Chasseurs Laotiens posted at strategic locations around the country; some were along the Thai border, others at the political centers of activity in Laos (Vientiane and Luang Prabang) and others were located to counter the Viet Minh threat in north and central Laos. For example, the 3d BCL was in Luang Prabang, the 5th BCL was in Vientiane, the 6th BCL was in Xieng Khoang, and the 8th was at Tchepone. Others were in Savanakheth and Pakse.

The officers and noncoms in the BCL's were either French or colonials from all parts of the French empire, such as Morocco, Sudan, Central Africa, and some were Vietnamese. The contemptuous attitudes these leaders had toward the local population were quickly adopted by the Lao soldiers of the BCLs. In fact, there was little if any difference in the way these Lao

soldiers treated the people and the brutal conduct of the French-Vietnamese who were deployed to Laos during the frontier incidents with Thailand.

The Lao soldiers of the French Union Army regarded themselves as superior to their own families, even to their own parents and relatives who might be civil servants in the Lao government. They willingly followed the French practices in the war against the Viet Minh insurgents, which included burning entire villages in which guerrillas were suspected to be hiding. The whole population of such a place might be destroyed just to eliminate a few insurgents.

This conduct inevitably brought letters of protest from the Lao government; while I was working in the office of the French commander I personally saw many of these. At the time, a French officer told me that there was no point in trying to deal generously with the population; the only way to handle the insurgency was to burn the villages where the rebels operated and kill the entire population.

It did bother the French somewhat to have to pay damages for the property they destroyed and the innocent people they killed or wounded and they tried to avoid doing so by delaying the procedures and payments. But it did not seem to bother them that their Draconian methods were exploited by the Viet Minh and Lao Issara to gain support from the people. We knew that the Viet Minh and Lao Issara had very little external support; almost no financial or military resources. They had to survive on the support of the population wherever they were. Every day the insurgent propaganda beat upon the ears of the villagers, telling them of the barbarous acts of the French Union Army and urging the people to unite in the struggle against the French and their colonials, to support the people's army fighting for the people's happiness.

We in the new NLA recognized the mistaken French concepts for fighting the insurgents. In our training program for our soldiers we tried to make them aware of the need to have the support of the people. When NLA units entered a village, they had to show the people that they were their sons and brothers and that they came to help not to make trouble. We were fighting for the support of the people, not for a barren spot of land.

This is not to say that we eliminated all sources of conflict with the villagers. We still had problems, but the source of most of them was the conduct of former members of the FUA who had transferred to the NLA. Some of these soldiers, because of their youth or innate selfishness, retained the old bad habits they had learned under the French.

As a matter of fact, most of the Lao who transferred from the FUA, regardless of rank, were poorly educated. None had attended high school and very few had attended advanced military courses or staff schools. Although the officers and non-coms among these veterans of the FUA were unskilled in staff work, most of them were effective, courageous commanders and the soldiers were tough campaigners who followed orders without question.

Before the Viet Minh invasion of 1953, the French exercised military command in Laos through two sector commands, each commanded by a lieutenant colonel. The division between the north and south sectors was at the Savannakhet-Khammoune Province boundary. The sectors were subdivided into sub-sectors with boundaries roughly corresponding to provincial boundaries. In each of the sub-sectors was stationed one BCL of the French Union Army; the battalion commander commanded all other forces, including those of the NLA, stationed or operating in the sub-sector. This battalion commander was usually a captain with considerable seniority; sometimes he was a major.

Four of the five rifle companies of the sub-sector BCL were usually deployed in separate garrisons with the responsibility of maintaining security in their assigned *quartier* or district. The fifth company was stationed with the battalion headquarters at the sub-sector command post. In the case of Vientiane Province, where the Pathet Lao threat was relatively slight, a battalion of the NLA, rather than a BCL, occupied the field positions. When reinforcement was required in a district, the BCL commander usually first detached sections — half of a company — from the deployed rifle companies and sent them to the threatened *quartier*. If the threat was serious and beyond the capability of the local units, the first major deployment to the area was usually made by the NLA 1st Lao Parachute Battalion. If more force was required, the next

reinforcement was usually made by deploying a BCL from the French Union Army. All forces deployed in a sub-sector were usually placed under the command of the sub-sector commander. The French were forced to change this command system during the Viet Minh invasion of 1953 when the French Union Army was impelled to deploy large forces from Vietnam to Laos. During that period, the internal command subdivisions were largely ignored and the French assumed total operational command until the 1954 cease-fire.

In the fall of 1953, following my tour of duty at the Reserve Officers Candidate School, the MMF/GRL commander called me to Vientiane and told me that we were going to organize an armor branch in the NLA, and that since I came from a prominent family, he suggested that I transfer from infantry to armor. (It was in the French tradition that cavalry and armor officers came from royal or prominent families.) I was then sent to Vung Tau, in South Vietnam, where the French operated an armor school. After attending the armor application course, about two months in duration, I returned to Laos to assume command of one of the four reconnaissance platoons of the 1st Lao Reconnaissance Squadron, NLA.

Conforming to French practice, the 1st Reconnaissance Squadron was what the U.S. Army would call a troop or a company. It had four identical reconnaissance platoons, each equipped with four scout jeeps, one scout car (about 3/4 ton) which mounted a .50 caliber machine gun and two .30 caliber machine guns, and one M-8 armored car with a 37-mm cannon. Squadron headquarters had a half-track with an 81-mm mortar. Later, the squadron acquired 57-mm recoilless rifles to mount on the scout cars and half-track, and one platoon of infantry (transported in two 2-1/2 ton trucks) was added to give greater anti-ambush and security capabilities to the squadron.

During the period from late 1953 to the Geneva Agreement ending the war in July 1954, the 1st Reconnaissance Squadron operated to keep Route 13 cleared of enemy ambushes from the Cambodian frontier north to Thakhet. My platoon operated out of Pakse and we fought a number of engagements along this stretch of road that was so important to maintain the steady flow of logistical support the Americans were shipping into Saigon for the convoys running north into Laos.

The 2d Reconnaissance Squadron was formed in 1954 and it assumed responsibility for the security of Route 13 from Savannkhet to Vientiane.

The transition from French to Lao command in the armed forces began in 1953. It was a gradual process as one-by-one the French officers in command of companies and battalions departed and Lao officers were appointed in their stead. At the highest echelon of command, the minister of defense finally, in 1954, appointed a Lao commander-in-chief and a chief of staff for the armed forces. These were, respectively, General Sounthone Pathammavong and Colonel Phoumi Nosavanh. Meanwhile, Lao officers were progressively appointed to assume directorships in the divisions of the general staff and to be chiefs of the technical services. The French officers who had occupied these positions remained as advisors since many months would pass before the inexperienced Lao officers were capable of performing their duties unaided.

After smouldering as an insurgency since the end of World War II, the Indochina War assumed the character of a more conventional conflict between large formations in 1953. The Vietnamese Communist Army brought the war to northeastern Laos with an invasion that threatened the royal capital of Luang Prabang, overrunning a number of Lao garrisons manned by forces of the new NLA as well as Lao units of the French Union Army. The initial Lao losses in these battles were heavy; the young army was being prematurely tested.

As the Viet Minh approached Luang Prabang and brought their artillery within range of the royal palace, the French high command sought an audience with King Sisavang Vong and urged him to evacuate his palace immediately, since a Viet Minh attack was imminent and the enemy might succeed in occupying the palace and taking him hostage. The king quietly thanked the French envoy for his concern but reminded him that when France imposed its authority on Laos in the late 19th century, it had executed a solemn agreement with the king's father pledging that France would do all that was necessary to defend Laos from external aggression. It was now time for France to keep its word. With that, the king announced that he would not leave the palace, that his duty was to remain with his people while his country was in peril.

Faced with the king's obduracy, the French were forced into desperate measures to save Luang Prabang and Laos. All available French Union forces were flown into Luang Prabang from Hanoi. Besides infantry and paratroopers, four M-24 light tanks were disassembled and flown to Luang Prabang where they were reassembled and emplaced as pill-boxes.² Luang Prabang and Vientiane were saved but meanwhile, the French lost the decisive battle at Dien Bien Phu. This calamity, coupled with the demoralizing influences of French politics and the growing troubles in North Africa, impelled the French to seek peace in Indochina. Thus, on the eve of a cease-fire, a battered National Lao Army entered a new phase of its existence.

During 1953 and 1954, the eight Battalions de Chasseurs Laotiens of the French Union Army had been gradually integrated into the NLA and the strength of the NLA increased from about 12,000 to 17,000. As this process neared completion, the bad feelings between the Lao soldiers of the two forces gradually disappeared and the NLA became the only army in which a Lao soldier could serve. Some Lao officers and non-coms of the French Army, however, chose not to serve in the NLA and were discharged. Some of these were employed in the administration of the civil government. In fact, only eight lieutenants holding commissions in the French Army elected to transfer to the NLA. A few others retained their French commissions but served the NLA in detached status. Two of these, Bounleut Sanichanh and Amkha Soukhavong reached general officer positions in the NLA while attaining only the rank of Lieutenant Colonel in the French Army.

In all cases, French Army regulations, general orders and manuals were used in the organization and operations of the National Lao Army. There were not translated into Lao because the Lao language lacked the

²Months later, after the cease-fire, as chief of the armor branch in the NLA, I had these tanks put in running order and, much to the surprise of my French advisers who thought it couldn't be done, had them driven all the way down to Vientiane from Luang Prabang, a distance of about 150 miles of very rough road.

the necessary technical vocabulary. Thai technical words could have been substituted for Lao, but only a minority of Lao would have been able to understand the Thai words, so the French texts were simply modified to fit the Lao situation. For example, in the mobilization directive for the Lao Army, essentially only references to the Kingdom of Laos were substituted for those mentioning the French Republic. In another case, the Lao Code of Military Justice was derived directly from the French code, but substantial revisions were required to conform to Lao customs and traditions. The work on this code was done by a French official — who happened to be half-Lao — in the ministry of justice.

By 1954, the transition from French to Lao command throughout the National Lao Army was complete. The MMF/GRL remained, however, and although it had less to do in the way of organization and field operations, it continued to supervise training in the several schools and training centers. The French Government, evidently seeing new importance in the growing and maturing National Lao Army, replaced the lieutenant colonel who had been commanding the MMF/GRL with a general officer.

Training in the New NLA

While the concepts for training in the NLA, as devised by the MMF/GRL, appeared to be sound, the execution of the training programs was probably the weakest activity in which the NLA was engaged in its 25 years of existence. The training plan, endorsed by the Armed Forces Command and presumably supervised by the Training Division under the guidance of the MMF/GRL, provided that every recruit would undergo basic training for three months. This training was to be conducted in the unit which recruited the new soldier.

Following this basic training, the soldier, if he showed the aptitude, might be sent to the training center that each military region operated. At this training center, the soldier would attend a six-month course, the successful completion of which would entitle him to the Certificate of Technical Aptitude Number 1 (CAT 1) and the rank of

corporal. Some graduates were selected to attend a following six-month course which awarded the CAT 2 certificate and the rank of sergeant.

This seemed to be an orderly, reasonable educational system which provided for progressive stages of learning with rewards based upon aptitude and accomplishment. But it didn't really work that way.

The military regions and the units assigned to them operated largely without supervision from the Training Division. When a villager or a civilian from the city wanted to join the army, he simply went to the main gate of the nearest garrison and told someone there what he wanted. He was then taken to the administrative officer who would give him the few necessary instructions and see that he was issued a green uniform. The next day he might begin training with a few other recruits. On the other hand, he might not if there were not a sufficient number of recruits at the time to justify the effort. The likelihood that any single recruit, no matter what aptitude he displayed, would be sent on to the regional training center for advanced training was extremely slight. The unit was usually never up to strength and was inclined to keep all its recruits. No unit commander was about to send his most promising men off to the region's training center since it was most unlikely that these men would ever return. As a result, thousands of Lao soldiers served for many years in the army with only the most rudimentary basic training. Thousands were also committed to battle without having any formal training at all. They learned whatever skills they could by observing the veterans of earlier operations. It was not even unusual for a young recruit to be handed his first rifle as the company filed out the gate on its way to meet the enemy.

Yet another fact of life in Laos had a detrimental effect on training, or at least on the inability of the army to follow a centralized, regular training plan. Each summer, for two or three months, usually beginning in June, the rice fields are prepared in the valleys and the rice must be planted. Labor is urgently needed by the farmers and the army always cooperated by releasing soldiers to return to their homes so that they could help their families with this annual task. Obviously, the possibility of conducting organized training greatly diminished during this period.

Because of the way the system worked, and because of the other drains on a unit's strength, such as combat losses, sickness, agricultural requirements -- as mentioned above -- and unauthorized absences, units rarely sent their most qualified officers and non-coms to advanced training courses. They just could not afford to lose them. It was possible that up to ten percent of any unit's strength might be away at some school at the same time. Unit commanders faced this problem by sending less qualified men, and sometimes even undesirables, off to training. The schools themselves suffered from a related problem. Since promotions were far faster in the command and staff positions of the army, the best officers and non-coms gravitated to these functions. Meanwhile, most of the officers and non-coms assigned to duty at the schools were below average in performance and ability. This fact, of course, contributed to the general low quality of instruction characteristic of the Lao Army school system.

The first four years of the National Lao Army -- that is, from the beginning to the Geneva Treaty of 1954, were indeed years of struggle and our army had to learn quickly in order to survive. We were in almost constant combat against the Pathet Lao and, later, the Viet Minh who invaded from the north in 1953.

As early as 1950, Laos had begun to receive American economic aid and military equipment. All American military supplies were delivered to the French in Saigon where they were broken out for distribution to Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. The supplies destined for Laos were trucked up Route 13 as far as Thakhek where they were put on boats for the passage to Vientiane. The road from Thakhek to Vientiane had not been maintained and could not accommodate heavy traffic. A joint commission had been established in Saigon to coordinate the distribution of American military assistance and a Lao officer, Second Lieutenant Bounma, was assigned there to represent the National Lao Army.³ Despite his presence

³Members of the commission were from Cambodia, France, Laos, United States and Vietnam.

there, Lieutenant Bounma had no influence on the amount or type of equipment the National Lao Army would receive. In fact, not only did he have no influence on these decisions, he was unable to find out how much or what the French would send to the NLA. Little of the new American equipment ever reached the NLA in any event; the French equipped the French Union Army in Laos with much of the American equipment and passed the obsolescent French materiel on to the NLA. The result was that NLA units were equipped with a hodge-podge of weapons, radios, and vehicles, most of it obsolete. Obviously, the demands on the supply and maintenance system for ammunition and spare parts were complex and frustrating. Training also became more difficult because of the multiplicity of types of weapons. Furthermore, the French instructors in the MMF/GRL had little familiarity themselves with the American arms and equipment.

Despite the many serious shortcomings of the Army training program, the National Lao Army continued to grow and improve during the years up to the Geneva Accords of 1954. That it was able to do so and accomplish its many operational missions was a credit to the Lao junior and senior officers who had profited from training abroad as well as at home. Although their military education was incomplete, they had the patriotism and devotion to overcome this obstacle and perform their duties.

CHAPTER III

The Royal Lao Army After the 1954 Geneva Accords

The 1954 Geneva Accords restoring peace in Indochina marked a new beginning for Laos in the realm of national defense. She had depended on the French to handle all aspects of her defense for over half a century and now she would have to shoulder this responsibility herself. It was apparent from the start that the four year old National Lao Army was ill-prepared for the task and would need lots of help from outside.¹

The French government recognized the weakness of the National Lao Army and retained a significant responsibility both to assist in the development of the NLA and to share the burden of the defense of Laos. Consequently, the Geneva Treaty, with respect to Laos, provided that the French could maintain a training mission not to exceed 1,500 officers and men, and a force of the French Union Army of not more than 3,500. The treaty further allowed the French to maintain a military base in the Vientiane area and another at Seno. As a matter of fact, however, the French Army strength in Laos rapidly decreased after the signing of the treaty and the maximum limits on French military strength in Laos imposed by the treaty were never approached. For example, by the end of 1956, the MMF/GRL had fewer than 400 men; by the end of 1959, its strength

¹The terms National Lao Army (NLA) and Royal Lao Army (RLA) are inter-changeable. The former term was commonly used by the Lao themselves, since they never considered that the Army belonged to the king but rather to the nation. The French called it the Royal Lao Army and this title was adopted by the Americans.

was only 300. The French Union Army maintained a force of about 700, most of it at Seno, by the end of 1956 and they never constructed the camp they were authorized in the Vientiane area under the treaty.

Administration and Logistics

As peace came to Laos, its army had grown to a force of about 17,000 men. Its elements were posted in Vientiane and Luang Prabang, as well as in some of the most remote areas of the nation. There were small garrisons at Nam Tha, Sayaboury, Paksane, Tha Thom, Xieng Khouang, Tchepone, Nhomnarath, Boun Neua, Savannakhet, Paksong, Pakse, Saravane, and Attopeu. The Lao Issara, meanwhile, withdrew to Phong Saly and Sam Neua.²

By 1955 I had been promoted to captain and was commanding the 1st Reconnaissance Squadron. By 1956 we had organized an additional squadron and I was promoted to major and given command of the Armor Command. This command roughly approximated a U.S. Army reconnaissance battalion of three companies, except that our three company-sized squadrons operated independently. The 1st Squadron was still in Pakse, the 2d was still in Thakhek, while the new 3rd Squadron was in Vientiane. Its routine mission was security of Route 13 north to Luang Prabang.

Providing administration and logistics for the far-flung garrisons of the National Lao Army was a serious challenge to the command and staff, for they were woefully untrained and inexperienced in these functions. The French had handled all these matters in the past and the systems they imposed on the NLA were, of course, those which they used in the French

²By this time, the Lao Issara had clearly become a Communist front organization, supported and strongly influenced by the Viet Minh. Consistent with Communist practice, it adopted the title of the Lao Nationalist Movement—"Pathet Lao"—claiming to represent the Lao Nation and people. We in the service of the established government of Laos refused to use the term Pathet Lao, so as not to dignify the claim of legitimacy, and persisted in referring to the Lao Communist as Lao Issara.

Union Army. Company and battalion administration was handled by French NCOs. This included all company and battalion supply and maintenance, the troop list and roster; even the payroll was handled by French officers.

Belatedly, the MMG/GRL had begun training Lao officers and NCOs in the administration branch. Too few Lao could qualify for the training since a good command of the French language and completion of at least high school was required. Since only a few Lao had been trained in France, there was a perennial shortage of qualified administrative officers and NCOs in the Lao Army. Nevertheless, although we could change from the French systems and concepts in such matters as tactics, drill and discipline, and were able to adopt the Lao language gradually in verbal commands, we had too few technically trained and educated staff officers and NCOs to enable us to devise and install a purely Lao system of reports, records and accounts. We were stuck with the French system. Even years later, when we relied totally upon American military assistance, the NLA persisted in using the French system of logistic records and organization. Only a few months before the collapse (in 1975) were we able to respond to American insistence that we modernize and simplify the logistic system. This evolution is discussed in Chapter VIII.

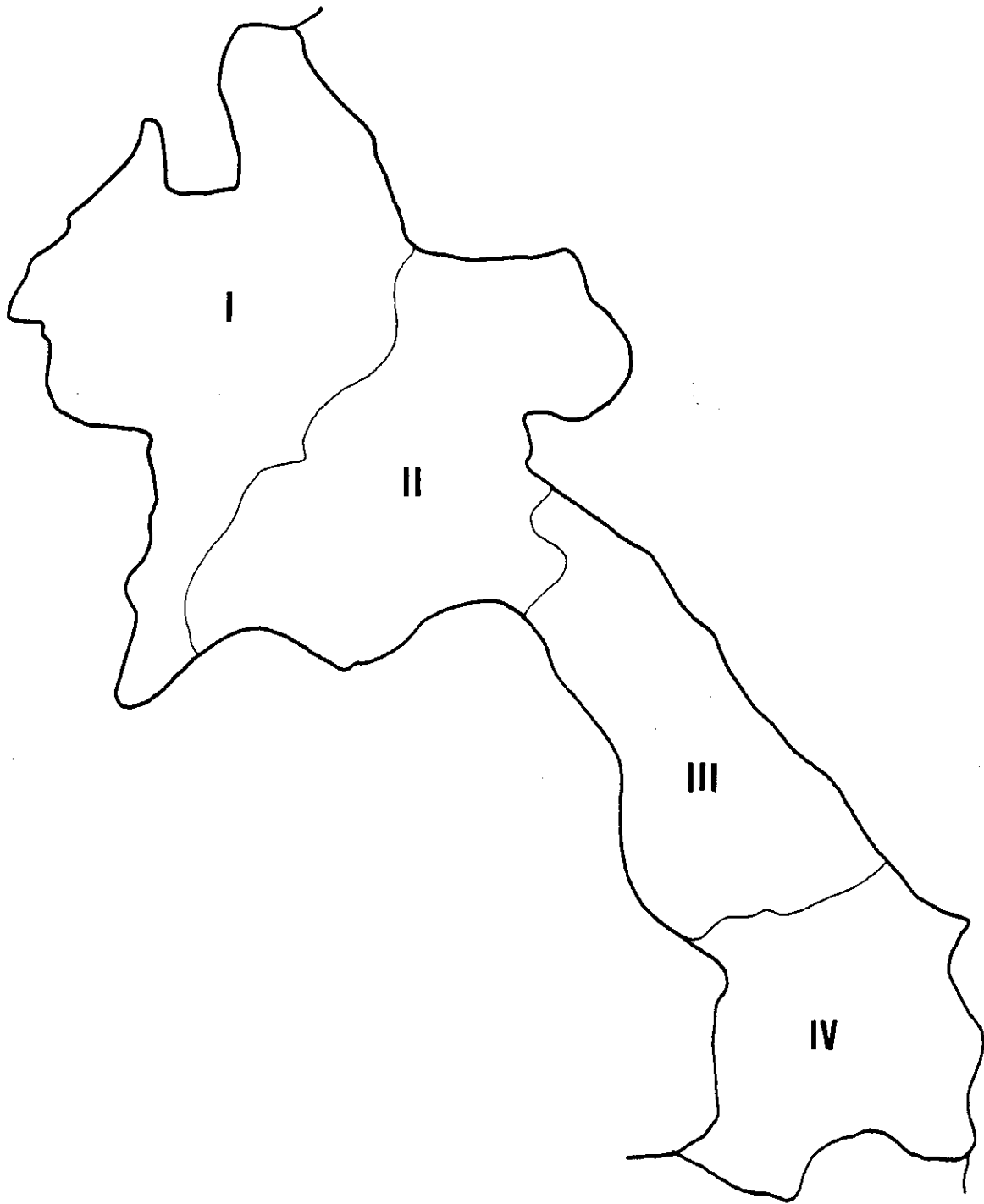
As Lao sergeants and corporals replaced the French non-coms in the companies and battalions of the NLA and assumed the responsibilities for unit records and reports, the inadequacy of their training became immediately apparent. The periodic reports they furnished to headquarters had, in many cases, been simply copied verbatim from reports previously submitted by their French predecessors. The Lao administrative non-coms just did not understand what they were writing, although they dutifully filled in all the blanks. The consequence was that field inspections would reveal absolutely different personnel status and supply levels than that which were reported. Although corrupt practices were sometimes evident in the distortions discovered, more often than not the source of the discrepancies was the inability of the unit officers and non-coms to understand what the reporting system required. Since the personnel and logistic reports formed the basis for rations (mostly rice issue) and pay, the potential for losses of resources and fraud were significant.

Regionalization of Command

The first chief of staff of the National Lao Army was General Sounthone Pathammavong who had served as governor of Savannakhet Province. General Sounthone had cooperated with the French Union Army in the resistance against the Japanese and had escaped the country along with the French when the Japanese began their purge toward the close of World War II. He fled to China, thence -- together with Phoui Sananikone-- to Kandy in Ceylon. He was perhaps more suited than any other Lao at this time to become chief of staff, and of course he had French backing. It was in his administration that the regional commands were instituted.

During the French regime, the French Forces Terrestres du Laos divided the country into two sectors to facilitate command, control and administration. These sectors -- North and South -- were subdivided into subsectors and each of these was commanded by the commander of the resident Bataillon de Chasseurs Laotien. In 1954, when Lao officers assumed command of the BCLs and these battalions were gradually integrated into the NLA, the Lao command and staff structure in Vientiane lacked the trained personnel as well as the communications and transportation needed to command and control the activities of the widely dispersed battalions. It was evident from the beginning that some decentralization and delegation of authority and responsibility was required. A move in this direction was also consistent with historical, ethnic and geographical factors. For example, the northwestern part of the country was the historical domain of the King of Luang Prabang, who was later installed as the King of all Laos. This region became Military Region I. Its provinces, Phong Saly, Nam Tha, Luang Prabang and Sayaboury were traditionally governed by relatives of the king. (*Map 2*)

Map 2 – The Original Military Regions of the National Lao Army
(1955)



The two provinces of Samneua and Xieng Khouang formed Military Region II.³ This region was largely populated by the Meo tribe whose support and loyalties were sought by both sides — government and Communists — during the long struggle in Laos. Xieng Khouang Province had been colonized by Vietnamese and had once been considered by Hanoi as the Vietnamese province of Tran Ninh. It contained the high, strategic plateau called the Plain des Jarres and access to this region was a great deal easier, from the standpoint of terrain and the road network, from Hanoi than from Vientiane. The French had vested political power in Tran Ninh in the Meo leadership and had, in fact, helped support the war against the Viet Minh with the proceeds of the opium market which flourished in Saigon; much of the opium came from Tran Ninh. The French competed with the North Vietnamese for the support of the Meo, just as the Americans did in a later period of the war. Thus, the character of Military Region II was distinct from all the others.

Military Region III contained the two large provinces of Khammoune and Savannakhet. Most of the people living there were lowland Lao who populated the fertile Mekong Valley and whose settlements and farms extended well into Thailand on the west side of the great river. Two fairly good roads linked the Mekong Valley with the coast of Vietnam and this fact accounted for the large number of Vietnamese who had migrated there. The Mekong Valley offered a better living to the poor peasants of Central Vietnam who had to scratch for survival on the coast which was annually torn by typhoons and floods. Military Region III was also distinctive because the major passes through the Annamite chain of mountains — principally the Mu Gia and Nape Passes — crossed into Laos from North Vietnam in this region, forming the beginning of the Ho Chi Minh Trail system, the primary logistical corridor used by the North Vietnamese to support their conquest of the south.

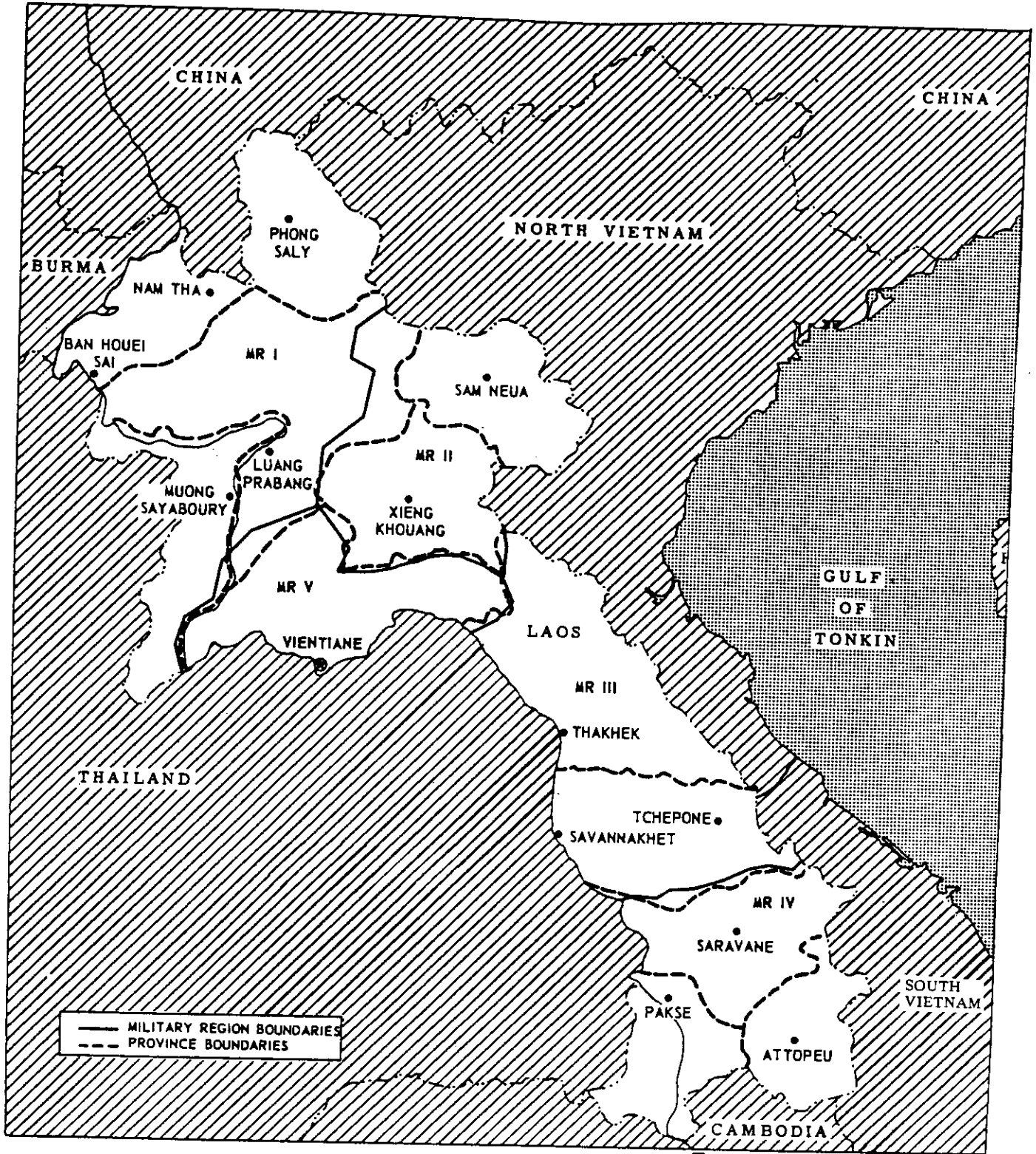
³The headquarters of Military Region II was in Xieng Khouang and the general staff in Vientiane soon discovered that the Military Region II command could not adequately attend to affairs in Borikane and Vientiane Provinces, which were originally part of the region. Consequently, the fifth region was formed with its headquarters in Vientiane.

The town of Pakse on the east bank of the Mekong River below the lofty Plateau des Bolovens was the capital of Sedone Province and the site of the headquarters of Military Region IV. Six provinces made up this region: Vapikhamthong, Saravane, Champassak, Sedone, Attopeu, and Sithadone. The area was the former Kingdom of Champassak and had been the domain of Prince Boun Oum, a member of the Luang Prabang royal family. When the French installed the King of Luang Prabang as the King of Laos, Prince Boun Oum agreed to forfeit his right of succession to the throne of Laos, but retained his status as the second-ranking royal figure in Laos. Not only was Prince Boun Oum the dominant political leader in southern Laos, but he was a prominent national politician as well. He was twice prime minister -- March 1948 to February 1950, and December 1960 to June 1962 -- and he was strongly allied with the powerful Kouprasith family of Pakse. Kou Abhay, Kouprasith's father, had been prime minister in the 1960 provisional government and Kouprasith himself was commander of Military Region IV for nearly 10 years. Furthermore, an intense rivalry had developed over the years between Phoui Sananikone, a powerful figure in Vientiane Province and in national politics (prime minister 1950-51 and 1958-59) and Prince Boun Oum. Thus, of all the regions, Military Region IV probably responded least to the central authority of Vientiane.

Aside from the lowland Lao who populated the Mekong Valley in Military Region IV, many semi-nomadic hill tribes lived in the interior jungles and mountains toward the Vietnam border. In 1935, the French governor at Pakse plotted the assassination of Kommadam, the leader of the Kha tribe, largest of these tribes. The attempt failed but started a war between the French and this tribe that lasted until the French left Indochina. It is an interesting example of how political affiliations might be shaped by rash and thoughtless acts, such as that of the French governor, to note that Khommadam, the son of the chief the French tried to kill in 1935, is now a minister in the Communist government of Laos. (Map 3)

As mentioned earlier, Military Region V was formed when it was discovered that the capital province and Borikane could not be effectively

Map 3 — The Military Regions After the Organization of Military Region V (1959)



controlled by Military Region II. The significant distinction of Military Region V, of course, was that it contained the nation's capital.

During the first year of the regional organization, 1955, the military region commanders exercised command over only the infantry battalions in their regions. The technical and combat support elements in the field continued to report to their branch chiefs in Vientiane. During the second year, however, as the regional staffs were augmented and became more experienced, the regional commanders were able gradually to assume operational control over all technical and support units in their military regions. Personnel, technical and administrative matters, however, remained in the hands of the branch at Army headquarters.

The military region commanders, and the forces they controlled, quickly became the centers and sources of all power in the provinces. The civil administration looked to the military for support and the means to carry out all civil projects. Naturally, the demands on the military for civil works varied from region to region, but the fact remained that the military organization was the only institution capable of performing in the fields of disaster relief, refugee assistance, road and bridge building and maintenance, security, and even medical services in the outlying areas. For example, in Military Region II, which, from 1953 to the end of the war, periodically suffered from the effects of North Vietnamese invasions, thousands of displaced people regularly congregated at the military outposts and garrisons. The local commanders were obligated by humanitarian considerations to furnish them shelter, food, clothing and medical treatment. This military involvement continued until the civil government agencies could assume the burdens that rightfully belonged to them. As one might expect, the army's generous and efficient involvement in civic projects and relief made the region commanders very popular with the people and enhanced their power in the provinces, although the military mission might have suffered in the process. In any event, it was a fresh experience for the villagers to be humanely treated and actually helped by soldiers; this was not the rule under the French regime. Furthermore, the rapport that was cultivated with the villagers through the Army's civic action benefitted military

operations against the enemy in various ways. One fact that became clear very early was that if the villagers did not cooperate with the Army in those areas where the Army was actively assisting them, those villagers were under the influence of the enemy.

Whereas the decentralization of command to the regions was probably the only feasible way to operate the military force and support the local civil authority under the conditions imposed on Laos by the North Vietnamese invasion, which began in 1960, and its support of the Lao Communist insurgency, and given the vastness and primitive nature of the terrain, the absence of central direction of the effort certainly impaired the efficiency and effectiveness with which the Army was employed. For example, there was virtually no cooperation or coordination between military region commanders in operations close to their boundaries with adjacent military regions. The enemy soon recognized this fact and exploited the situation by establishing his camps and lines of communications in the border areas where they were unlikely to be disrupted by Lao Army operations.

While the lack of cooperation and coordination between region commanders degraded the effectiveness of military operations in a local sense, the absence of a comprehensive national strategy had a major impact on the defense of our nation as a whole, and probably was one of the principal failures responsible for the final collapse of Laos. Never did the king or any prime minister ever enunciate a national military policy. Periodic meetings were conducted by the general staff at which the king and prime minister were informed of the military situation in the country and of the operations being conducted by the region commanders. Rarely did the staff receive so much as a royal comment or a ministerial approval -- or disapproval either -- during these briefings. It was as if the regional operations were occurring in remote countries, independent of each other, and beyond the control or influence of the Lao government. The government perceived the regional commanders as serving the national security interests so long as they attempted to enlarge the areas under their military influence or control. For their part, the military region commanders improvised operations day-by-day and kept the general staff more or less informed of their progress. Only if they required

reinforcements in the form of units from the general reserve or additional logistics did they have to inform the general staff in advance of an operation. In this case, they would propose the operation to the national military headquarters and specify the support they required. In the event the general reserve units were already in his region, the region commander could employ them without specific authority from the high command.

The military region commander represented the national military authority in his region, was the principal support of the local civil administration, and in most cases, operated on the basis of his broadly construed powers without any but the most general guidance from the central government or the Army General Staff.

The Programs Evaluation Office

As mentioned earlier, the MMF/GRL remained in operation at reduced strength following the 1954 Geneva Treaty. Training continued at the Lao Army schools and training centers under French instructors and with French materials and language, but with a conglomeration of American, British and French weapons and equipment. The NLA had grown to about 25,000 men and there were about 11,000 in the local self-defense forces. Then, in December 1955, the Americans established in Vietniane a small facility to handle directly, rather than through the French as before, U.S. military assistance to the NLA. They called it the Programs Evaluation Officer (PEO) and it began with a staff of only six people, although in its second year of operation its size had increased to more than 20. Although the PEO would give the Americans first-hand control over the distribution and employment of U.S. military assistance to Laos, the MMF/GRL retained the authority and responsibility for all training for the NLA. Consequently, in training matters, the PEO, ostensibly at least, was under the supervision of the French officers of the MMG/GRL. We in the NLA who observed the functioning of both the MMF and the PEO could see that the French resented the intrusion of the Americans into the NLA training system, but there was little they could do about it. The Americans, for their part, conducted themselves with admirable tact and

diplomacy in their contacts with the French and prevented the French resentments from interfering with the program of support.

Perhaps the greatest and most important difference between the French and American approach to training the NLA was in the use of language. While the French persisted in the use of French, the Americans presented all training in our own native tongue. The Americans entered Laos via Thailand and brought with them to Vientiane Lao-speaking clerks and interpreters. These interpreters were used to translate the English of the American instructors into Lao and to assist in all contacts between the PEO members and Lao officials. The transition from French military terminology to Lao was difficult at first because the Lao soldiers were already familiar with the basic French terms, and the technical words did not exist in the Lao language. Thai words had to be used in most cases, and although Thai is similar to Lao, its use still meant that new words had to be learned. The Lao officers and NCOs who had good command of the French language naturally preferred to continue using it in training, while the poorly educated soldiers found the American system more interesting. Even those of us who knew French well also realized that learning the American military systems, as well as the English language, would open new opportunities. After all, French influence in Indochina was all but gone and American influence was on the rise.

While the French missions in Laos had for years been supported and controlled from the French headquarters in Hanoi-- an advantage they no longer enjoyed after 1954-- the Americans had a similar arrangement in Thailand. Although Thailand, of course, was not an American colony, it was a military ally of the U.S. and appeared to support fully all early U.S. activities in Laos. Personnel, transportation, real estate and military bases were supplied by the Thai government and without this support it seems likely that the American missions in Laos would have been much more costly and difficult to operate.

In early 1956 when the PEO began operating in Vientiane and dispatching small teams of experts out to our military regions, I had by this time been promoted to the rank of colonel and was too senior for