

a troop command in my branch, armor, so I was designated chief of the armor branch. I held, in addition, the position of G-5 - civil affairs staff officer - on the NLA general staff. It was in these capacities that my first contacts with the PEO were made. Close personal relationships were established quickly between the Americans of the PEO and the chiefs of the NLA staff sections and technical services. The Americans, in contrast to the French, approached problems, made recommendations, and in general dealt with the Lao officers in an easy, informal manner. It was a new experience for us to be treated as professional and social equals. The absence of the overbearing, superior attitude commonly displayed by most of our French advisers was refreshing. In order to improve understanding, the Americans also started a special English language course for NLA leaders.

Despite the best efforts of the Americans in the PEO, some Lao officers, notably those who had served in the French Union Army, found it difficult to adjust to the new situation. They could see that their former mentors and commanders, the French, were unhappy with the American intrusion and these Lao could not overcome easily their deeply ingrained loyalties to the French. On the other hand, they were wise enough to realize that the French era in Laos was coming to a close and that the future of the NLA, as well as the security of the nation itself, was being transferred to American hands. Years of heavy fighting had left the combat elements of the NLA seriously depleted in all types of equipment - armored cars, trucks, radios, weapons and spare parts - and only American support could rebuild the fighting potential of the NLA. Thus, it was essential that the NLA leadership put aside its past and cooperate fully with the PEO.

During this period of transition, the MMF/GRL continued its training mission for our officers and NCOs in the fields of administration, tactics and combat support, while the PEO, in coordination with the MMF, concentrated on logistic support training for the NLA technical services. There was no overlap or conflict between the French and American training. Meanwhile, shortly after the Geneva Treaty was concluded, the NLA assumed total responsibility for the training of recruits.

Due probably in large measure to the presence of the PEO, the French staff in the MMF/GRL gradually mellowed in its relationship with our senior officers. The French accepted the idea that they could no longer command the NLA and that the NLA had to depend more and more on American support. Because the MMF/GRL no longer provided material support for the NLA, its name was eventually changed (in about 1960) to the Mission Militaire Francaise d'Instruction Près le Gouvernement Royal du Laos (MMFI/GRL).

Training opportunities for Lao officers in France were expanded as the activities of the MMFI in Laos were gradually curtailed. At the same time, the PEO gradually increased its involvement in training and began selecting Lao officers for training in the United States.

In summary, the transition from French support and influence in the NLA was gradual, smooth and carefully handled by the officials of the three countries involved.

The MMF/GRL managed to survive in Laos for 25 years. It hung on, performing logistic and training missions during the last years of the First Indochina War. It worked alongside the American missions that began arriving in 1956 and it persisted throughout the Second Indochina War. It was still there when the Americans had to leave following the 1962 Accords and after the Paris Agreements of 1973. It even stayed in Laos for a few months after the Communists took control of the government in early 1975. Not until ordered out by the Communists at the end of 1975 did the MMF/GRL finally leave Laos.

## CHAPTER IV

### The Factionalization of the National Lao Army

#### *Neutrality Versus Anti-Communism*

In order to understand the evolution of American policy in Laos and the various forms American military assistance assumed during the period following the Geneva Treaty of 1954, a brief outline of the turbulent course of Lao politics is necessary.

Simply stated, the central political issues were neutrality and peaceful reconciliation between the divided factions of the Lao nationalist movement. The nationalist faction that had acceded to power in Vientiane with the help of the departing French was essentially anti-Communist in outlook and policy but willing, at least initially, to support neutrality as the best means toward achieving a unified, secure and peaceful Laos. On the other hand, the Pathet Lao had fallen under the absolute control of the Viet Minh and although they also publicly advocated neutrality, this was only a shallow cover for their total commitment to Vietnamese style Communism. Nevertheless, these two opposing factions, under the leadership of Souvanna Phouma, made some early progress toward a peaceful reconciliation.

Souvanna Phouma was prime minister of Laos when the PEO began operating in early 1956. Throughout his political career, Souvanna Phouma was convinced that the causes of peace and independence in Laos could best be served through a policy of strict neutrality. He was determined to prevent his country from being drawn into the cold war and made public statements to this effect during visits to Hanoi and Peking in August 1956. He pledged that he would allow no foreign military bases, other than the two French bases specified in the 1954 treaty, to be established in Laos and that Laos would endeavor to remain on friendly terms with all nations, Communist and non-Communist alike. To emphasize this point, he visited the capital of South Vietnam a few days after his meeting with Ho Chi Minh.

Because the appearances of neutrality were important in Lao government policy, the United States gave the PEO the appearance of a civilian organization. It had been attached to the United States Operations Mission (USOM), the U.S. mission in Vientiane which administered economic assistance to Laos under the 1950 American aid agreement. Furthermore, although we in the NLA could recognize by their conduct and appearance that the staff of the PEO were military men, they dressed in civilian clothes and did not use their military titles. Strictly speaking, of course, the PEO could not have been considered a foreign military base in the context of Souvanna Phouma's pledge, but had its members been openly identified as American army officers, Souvanna's claim of neutrality would have come under serious attack from the Communists. It was very clear to all concerned that the Geneva treaties prohibited the establishment in Laos of an American military assistance advisory group.

By the summer of 1958, the cause of neutrality as a force in Lao policy began to weaken. Phoui Sananikone had become prime minister while advocating a hard line against the Pathet Lao who, under the 1954 treaty, still occupied the northern provinces of Phong Saly and Sam Neua. The coalition government had collapsed and the Pathet Lao leader Souphanouvong, who had been elected to the national assembly in May 1958, was denied membership in the cabinet. Nevertheless, Phoui announced that Laos would remain faithful to its policy of neutrality in world affairs, that he wanted the Pathet Lao to participate in the national government, but that he objected to the military and political support that Hanoi was providing the Pathet Lao. Nevertheless, Phoui proceeded with the integration of the Pathet Lao into the National Lao Army. The 1st and 2d Pathet Lao Battalions became part of the NLA and were stationed in their "home" territory on the on the Plaine des Jarres. Individual members of the Pathet Lao were also permitted to join the NLA and were given official rank in accordance with their former positions in the Pathet Lao.

*The Committee for the Defense  
of the National Interests (C.D.N.I.)*

Meanwhile, a new force had entered the arena of Lao politics, the Committee for the Defense of the National Interests (CDNI). The source of CDNI power was the army itself. Although it did not claim to be a political party, its influence was clearly understood by Phoui Sananikone and he agreed to appointing four of its members to cabinet posts in his new government: Khamphan Panya, foreign affairs; Leuan Rajsombath, finance; Sisouk Na Champassack, information and tourism; and Inpenh Suryadhay, justice. Later, under increased pressure from CDNI, he added three more: Sounthone Patthammavong become minister of national defense; Phoumi Nosavan became deputy minister of national defense (and the real power in the army); and I became deputy minister of public health and social affairs.

CDNI's attitude toward the Communists was parallel to that of Phoui Sananikone; it was firmly anti-Communist. But CDNI also wanted a reform of the civil service and a reduction of nepotism and corruption in government. It wanted provincial governments to carry out the national programs of social and economic reforms and to put aside the old customs of patronage that kept the people in poverty and ignorance. We were largely a group of young army officers -- I was a secretary general of the CDNI -- but we also had influential civilian leadership and members. Inpenh Suryadhay, minister of justice, for example, was the original organizer of the movement. Of course, since the movement would have little influence without the power and resources of the army behind it, officers such as Phoumi Nosavan and Kouprasith Abhay became the leaders to be reckoned with. Although Phoui Sananikone was forced to ally himself with the CDNI, he didn't like it and resented its reformist activities and its ability to attract the support of the army and the young civil servants. For example, 1200 officials from the provinces attended the CDNI convention in mid-1959 in Vientiane.

The American mission in Vientiane also recognized the importance of the CDNI as a force for reform and found ways to support it. We always needed funds for transportation and for our public assistance and



The Author, Fourth from Right, with Young Members of the CDNI:  
From Left to Right: Dr. Khamphay Abhay, former Minister of Public Health; Bouavanh Norasing, Lawyer; Colonel Kham Thene Chindavong, former Director of Army Psywar; Unknown; Nivong Souvanheuang, Director of Interior Department; Author, Oudone Sananikone; Chao Sopsaysana, former Vice-Speaker of National Assembly; Boun Khong Pradichit, former Director of Police; Chanthone Chanthasay, Deputy-Minister of Foreign Affairs Ministry

information projects and the Americans, notably the CIA, were usually able to help significantly.

### *Phoui Sananikone's Hard Line Policy*

The anti-Communist bias of Phouai's government was demonstrated in 1959 when South Vietnam and Nationalist China were permitted to open consulates in Vientiane. Meanwhile, North Vietnam, seeing that a political unification of Vietnam through the elections envisaged by the 1954 treaties was not going to happen, had begun its development of the Ho Chi Minh trail system in the border area of the southern provinces of Laos. This system would be expanded and fortified to support the Viet Cong insurgency in South Vietnam and later as the principal line of communications for the North Vietnamese Army invasion of South Vietnam. In any event, it became clear by December 1958 that the policy of neutralism for Laos was no longer realistic. Phouai's aggressive moves against the Pathet Lao, as well as North Vietnam's occupation of the Ho Chi Minh trail area of Laos negated the feasibility of neutrality.

During the last week of December 1958, Hanoi charged the Phouai government with aggressive violations, by land and air, along the border between the two countries. This was the area in which the North Vietnamese were busily developing the Ho Chi Minh trail. Following these accusations, the Hanoi government, in characteristic Communist fashion, sent a battalion sized force into the Tchepone area where it began fortifying this key location on the Ho Chi Minh trail. It was becoming clear in Vientiane that a long military confrontation between Lao and Vietnamese Communists was unavoidable. In recognition of this, on 15 January 1959 Phouai asked and received from the national assembly permission to govern for one year without reference to the legislature.

One of Phouai's first acts under this new authority was to announce that he would see to the destruction of the Neo Lao Hak Sak -- the political arm of the Pathet Lao -- as a legal political party. Heeding this warning, most of the remaining NLHS members in the national assembly left town in a hurry. Phouai's hard line against the Communists continued

to gain strength when he declared in February that, because of the situation in Vietnam, Laos was no longer bound by the terms of the Geneva Accords of 1954. Thus, the door was opened still further for the assertion of American military policy in Laos; that of employing Laos forces and Laos terrain in the war against the North Vietnamese.

Phoui's anti-Communist campaign continued to grow during the spring and summer of 1959. When on 18 May the 2d Battalion of the Pathet Lao forces, which had been occupying a camp on the Plaine des Jarres since its integration into the National Lao Army, secretly evacuated the camp at night and escaped toward North Vietnam, Phoui had Souphanouvong and the remaining NLHS assembly-men arrested and placed in house arrest in Vientiane.

#### *Trouble in Samneua*

Shortly following the 2d Battalion's departure, guerrilla attacks against NLA garrisons in Samneua began. The little NLA mud forts and the villages they were to protect fell one by one to the Pathet Lao assaults. The NLA was being forced out of Samneua by a cleverly executed Pathet Lao offensive which was firmly supported by Hanoi. Phoui responded to the crisis in Samneua by asking the United States for more help and in late July, the United States said that it was going to send additional technicians to Laos in order to help increase the size and combat ability of the National Lao Army.

Shortly afterwards, about one hundred American officers and soldiers in civilian clothes arrived along with a surge of new vehicles and equipment. These were men from the U.S. Army 7th Special Forces Group of Fort Bragg. But this American support had little if any impact on the situation in Samneua where heavily armed guerrilla units, some with North Vietnamese cadres, continued their assaults on government garrisons. By the end of July 1959, the Pathet Lao controlled a large number of villages and hamlets in northwestern Samneua. By early August, they had control of the east bank of the Nam Ma (river) and Muong Khoua in Phong Saly. The defenses in these areas were manned by small elements of CVs that withdrew quickly as the PL appeared.

On 4 August, Phoui declared a state of emergency in all of the provinces bordering Vietnam from the China frontier in Phong Saly to Savannakhet and asked the United Nations Secretary General to inform the members of the serious situation and North Vietnam's aggression against Laos. Meanwhile, although the rainy season was in full force and deployments were difficult, by the middle of August Phoui had deployed almost 3,000 troops to Samneua Province. The force was under the command of Brig. General Amkha Soukhavong, the commander of MR II, and included the two parachute battalions and two BIs, plus elements of two additional BIs. With this force, General Amkha Soukhavong was able to occupy several villages in the province as well as the province capital.

As August drew to a close, an enemy force of about five battalions crossed the Nam Ma near Muong Het, and at other points downstream forcing the NLA units to withdraw to new defenses northeast of the province capital. Its objective apparently accomplished, the enemy force then abruptly withdrew back into North Vietnam. Phoui then made a second appeal for United Nations intervention.

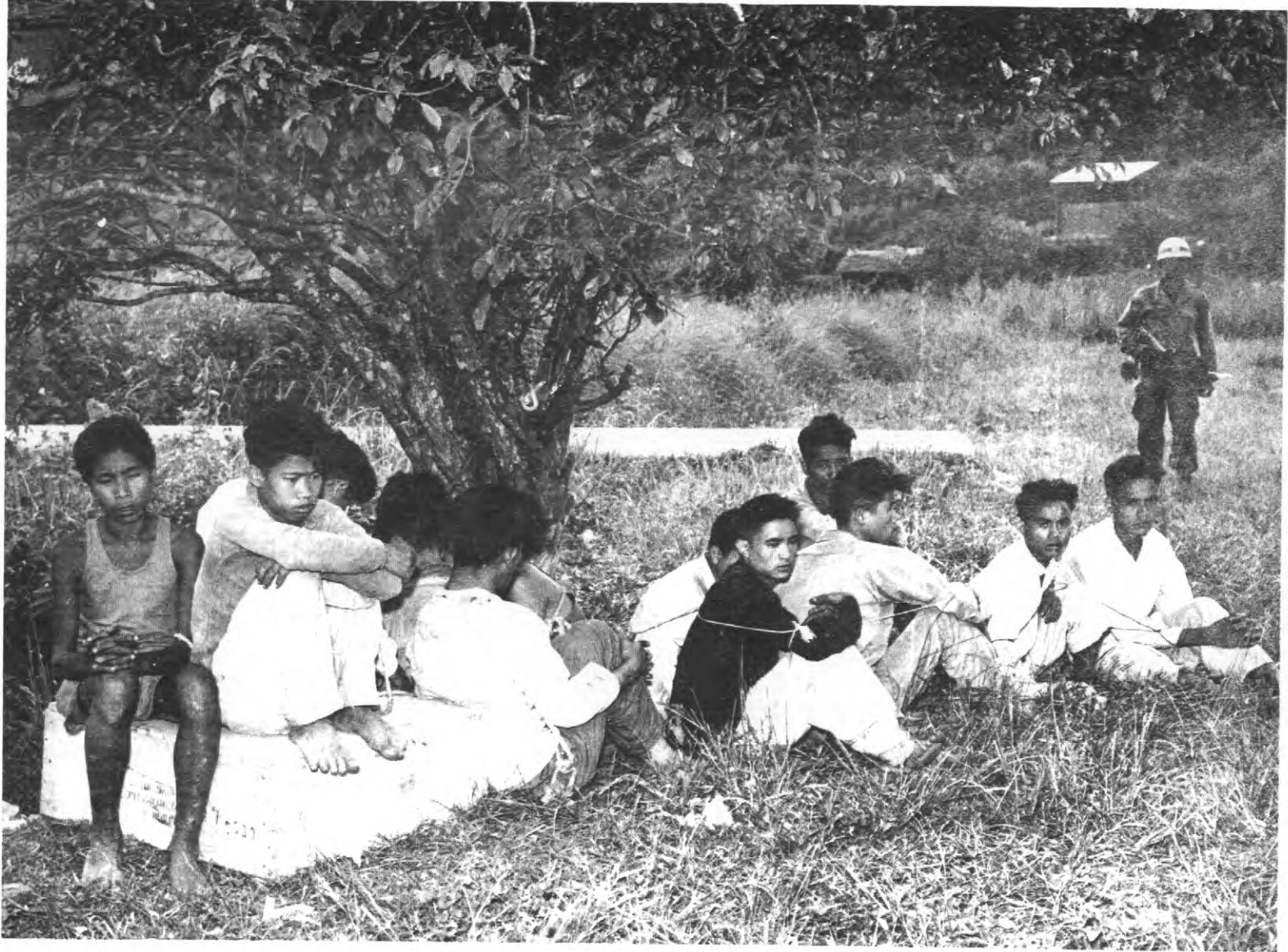
Later in September, the United Nations dispatched an investigative committee to Vientiane for the purpose of determining, essentially, the scope of North Vietnam's involvement in the attacks on Laos soil. As a member of the cabinet, I escorted the committee on its visit to Samneua. There were four members but only those from Argentina, Italy, and Japan flew with me to Samneua. The Tunisian member evidently did not want to risk the dangers of a flight to remote, besieged Samneua. He remained in Vientiane.

A few prisoners had been captured in recent operations in Samneua and these -- some Pathet Lao and some Vietnamese -- were presented for interrogation by the United Nations committee. The committeemen did not stay in Samneua overnight, but returned to Vientiane. They did return the following day, however, and continued their investigation. Very little of value to Phoui's cause came out of this U.N. excursion, however. The committee's report was inconclusive. While it suggested that there was some evidence that the fighting in Samneua was supported materially from Vietnam, there was no conclusive proof that North Vietnamese Army units had crossed the border into Samneua.

At this time, the PEO was supporting the Lao armed forces with an authorized strength of about 25,000 men and a local militia of about 14,000. The NLA had 12 infantry battalions (BI), 12 volunteer (provincial) battalions (BV), one artillery battalion, two parachute infantry battalions, a river patrol squadron and three armored reconnaissance squadrons. Our small airforce had eight C-47s, six L-19s, and four L-20s. Each province, of which there were twelve at that time, had its own volunteer battalion which the province chief deployed by companies in the critical areas of his province. A regular BI was also located in each province as a reserve to deal with any significant Pathet Lao threat. Occasionally, when the situation demanded, elements of the BV were joined with the BI in a task force for operations against the Pathet Lao, but more commonly, the CVs remained in their home villages providing local security.

#### *Phoui Sananikone is Replaced*

In any event, despite the inconclusive findings of the United Nations committee, North Vietnam continued its support of, and sometimes active participation in the assaults on the villages and government posts in the border regions. Meanwhile, the old king, Sisavang Vong, died in his palace in Luang Prabang and was succeeded by his son Prince Savang Vatthana. At the same time Phoui was having trouble in his cabinet. The CDNI cabinet members, including General Sounthone Patthammavong, who was commander-in-chief of the armed forces, Colonel Phoumi Nosavan, who was chief of staff and deputy minister of defense, and myself -- I was commissioner of civic action -- were becoming more and more dissatisfied at Phoui's inability to promote reforms and prosecute the war against the Pathet Lao with vigor. Phoui had, over his year in office, softened his attitude toward the NLHS and virtually ignored the cabinet's many attempts to guide him toward a more firm and comprehensive anti-Communist policy. The CDNI was still a powerful force in Lao politics. It still enjoyed the American support that had backed its activities since 1958, and these Americans made it clear that they also were not happy with Phoui's ineffectual policies *vis-a-vis* the Pathet Lao.



The Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese Prisoners of War  
Seen by the United Nations Team at Samneua



The Argentine Delegate Greeted by the People of Sameua

BEST WISHES TO  
THE U.N. MISSION



The United Nations Team Enters Samneua



The United Nations Team in Session in Samneua  
(The Author is on the Right)

Therefore, the CDNI decided it was time to act. But it was Phoui himself who brought matters to a head by proposing to remove Phamphan Panya, the minister of foreign affairs, from the cabinet.

Mr. Panya was an important civilian leader in the predominantly military CDNI and we refused to permit his dismissal by Phoui. In fact, the CDNI military leadership, headed by Colonel Phoumi Nosavan, was quite ready to assume control of the government by *coup d'etat*.

Although Phoui expected trouble, he did not believe, initially at least, that a *coup* was imminent. This is because we confined our protest, in the beginning, to the political act of resignation. All seven CDNI members of the government, including General Patthammavong, Colonel Nosavan and myself, resigned.

On the evening of the day we resigned, Phoui Sananikone called me to his residence. When I entered the room I noticed that General Patthammavong had arrived before me and was seated among Phoui's staff. To my great surprise, Phoui bluntly told me that he had learned that a *coup* was imminent and asked me what I knew about it. I followed my first reaction which was to ask General Patthammavong what was going on; he had been commander-in-chief and would have been in a position to know about it. He denied any knowledge of it however, while Phoui, growing more and more agitated, insisted that the army was already in position to act against him. I tried to calm him and suggested that he call in General Ouan Rathikoun, who had just been appointed commander-in-chief, and ask him about it. General Rathikoun was contacted immediately and also denied any knowledge about a *coup*. That left only one possibility; Colonel Phoumi Nosavan, from his position of deputy minister of defense could have mustered the force required to execute a *coup*.

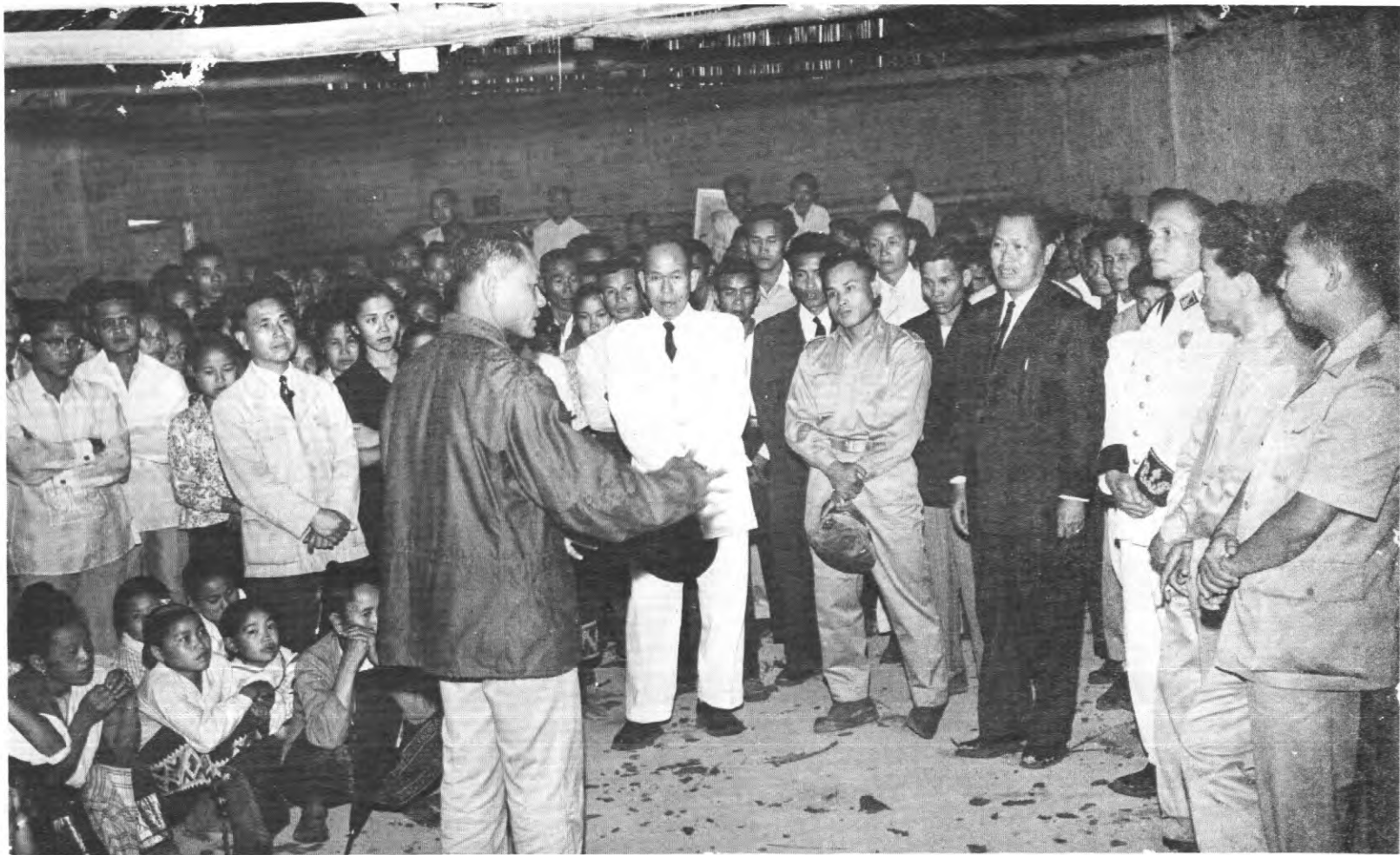
With this likelihood in mind, I advised my cousin Phoui to ask for an audience with the king, review the situation with his Majesty, and permit the king to select a new prime minister. Phoui finally realized that serious fighting between Lao units -- those loyal to him and those in the Nosavan camp -- would erupt if he failed to follow this advice and presented his resignation to the king on 30 December 1959. The following morning, Phoumi's units moved to occupy all government offices and secure the city.

Following Phoui's departure from the government, the king selected Kou Abhay, who was president of the king's council, to lead a provisional government until the elections would take place in April. Notably, Phoumi Nosavan remained in the cabinet and moved up from deputy minister to minister of defense. Preparations for the election began immediately.

The CDNI assumed an active role in electioneering. We travelled to all the provinces, speaking on behalf of the anti-Communist candidates and programs. But we did much more than just talk. We knew that action to benefit the people would be necessary if we were to be successful in countering the propaganda, coercion and threats of the Pathet Lao. One of the most effective methods I used exploited unfulfilled promises that had been made by the Pathet Lao to the villagers. For example, I would question the village leaders; perhaps I would learn that the Pathet Lao had visited the village recently and promised to return and build a school house. With this information and the transportation and funding assistance provided by members of the U.S. mission, I would see that the government would deliver the materials for the village school house and see that it was built immediately. This sort of response to village needs was repeated in village after village and demonstrated to the people that their government cared for them and would act, while the Pathet Lao only talked.

This technique of campaigning for public support in the provinces was not original with us, of course. Our American advisers had discussed it with us as a method that had worked well in the Philippines and was being used in Vietnam, and furthermore, American support was necessary to its success. Obviously Laos did not have the material resources in sufficient abundance to spread throughout the country.

Although I was a member of the CDNI, as were many of the campaigners and some of the other cabinet ministers, we campaigned not as representing the CDNI -- which was not a political party -- but as representing the anti-Communist wing and as members of the government. But this quick reaction civic action program that we carried to the provinces was not the whole story of the preparations the government made for the April election. And it was not the only reason for the landslide victory the government candidates achieved; a few other techniques were employed to



The Author Explaining the CDNI Objectives During the Election Campaign in Samneua.  
From Extreme Right to Left: Sisouk Na Champassak, former Minister of National Defense  
Ministry; Inpeng Suryadhay, former Lao Ambassador in Court of St James; and Provincial Authority.  
Others not identified

weaken the Pathet Lao (NLHS) challenge. For one thing, the government raised the education standards that each candidate would have to meet. Very few NLHS candidates could qualify, indeed, most of them were illiterate. The government also raised the filing fee for each candidate and many could not raise the money. The result was that out of 59 seats in the national assembly, the NLHS could run for only nine. Three or more anti-Communist candidates filed for each available office. This, of course, divided the right-wing vote and should have worked to the advantage of the NLHS candidates. The result, however, did not reflect any such advantage; all NLHS candidates were overwhelmingly defeated.

Charges that the election was rigged were made by defeated candidates immediately after the results were determined. Certainly there was some justification for these charges. Phoumi Nosavan had passed out large quantities of money to village headmen -- funds he obtained from Americans -- before the election. Other unfair practices, such as using Army planes to drop election leaflets, were used. Nevertheless, even without the extreme measures employed by Phoumi Nosavan, the anti-Communist candidates would have been largely successful. Our civic action program was influential in this regard. The result would have only been less decisive.

A few weeks after the election, another event further disturbed the tranquility of Vientiane. Prince Souphanouvong and his NLHS colleagues escaped from confinement. After being held in house arrest for several months, they had been moved to Camp Phonekheng, in Vientiane, which was the headquarters of the provost Marshal. Although it is not documented to my knowledge at least, the escape was engineered and ordered by none other than Phoumi Nosavan himself. A truck was provided, the gate was unlocked, the guards assisted, and the Pathet Lao leaders drove out of Vientiane on the morning of 24 May. Of course, the formal investigation that followed failed to disclose what really happened. The event was simply another illustration of Phoumi Nosavan's erratic and impulsive behavior. He was inclined to accept the most specious advice and act without due study or careful consideration of the consequences. Some of his acts could be reversed -- such as the formation of Military Regions VI and VII -- but others, such as the "escape" of Souphanouvong, were irrevokable.

## *Kong Le Brings Neutralism to Vientiane*

The 2d Parachute Battalion was an elite, hard-fighting unit of the National Lao Army. Its commander, Captain Kong Le, a veteran of the French Union Army, had led it on many successful operations in Sam Neua as well as in southern Laos. Following the elections, it had been posted to Vientiane for rest and refitting and occupied some miserable shacks on the mud flats outside the city. Kong Le vigorously protested these accommodations to the ministry of defense and word of his dissatisfaction even reached the king. On Friday, 5 August, the battalion was told that a new camp had been approved for the men and that they could begin work on it the following Monday. That day, 8 August, General Phoumi Nosavan and the entire cabinet flew to Luang Prabang to discuss funeral arrangements for King Sisavang Vong with King Savang Vatthana. Meanwhile, instead of being permitted to begin work on the new camp, the 2d Parachute Battalion was ordered to conduct an operation against a Pathet Lao pocket west of the capital.

Kong Le viewed this event as a breach of trust with him and his men. There is ample evidence that Kong Le had harbored some strong resentments against the Vientiane civil and military leadership for many years; that he was essentially a loyal soldier but that he abhorred the war that pitted Lao against Lao while the nation's leaders lived the soft life and grew wealthy and powerful under the largess of American aid. He had envisioned a *coup* for some time and had prepared for it by personally filling all the leadership positions in his battalion with hand-picked officers who felt the same as he and who would follow him in any venture, no matter how audacious. Now the opportunity had arrived.

At three o'clock in the morning, 9 August 1960, Kong Le's battalion fanned out across the city, occupied all key positions, took over the radio station, the government offices, the power plant and the airport. Early that morning the radio station announced that the 2d Battalion had assumed all military and civil authority in all of Laos. Kong Le had made his move but as the situation developed, it became quite clear that he did not have any clear concept of what to do next. He had, temporarily

at least, delivered the country from the control of a government that he considered not only corrupt, but responsible for perpetuating a war that pitted Lao against Lao and for subjecting Laos to a new period of colonialism, this time under the Americans. The trouble was that Kong Le was too naive and unschooled in politics and he had no plan to govern the country. Nevertheless, overnight he became a very popular figure among the people. Although the people in general had no idea of how impractical Kong Le's program was at the time, they were happy to support his goals of bringing peace and neutrality to Laos. This was the purpose of the *coup*, so announced Kong Le two days after the take-over.

Kong Le's *coup d'etat* caught me completely by surprise. At the time, I had resigned from the cabinet and had returned to the Army as inspector general of the armed forces with the rank of colonel. On the morning of 9 August I was driving from my home in Vientiane to the airport to catch a six-thirty plane for Saigon where I had some army business to conduct. My jeep driver and I were both in uniform as we rolled across the quiet city. Approaching the airfield, we came to a barricade guarded by a squad of paratroopers. I still did not know what was going on and I told the soldiers to let me pass, that I was on official business. They refused, saying that the airport was closed. I asked for their commander and shortly a lieutenant appeared. Again I demanded to be allowed to pass, but I was again refused.

As we were arguing, a weapons carrier drove up and I was told that it would take me to the headquarters where all would be explained to me. I had no choice but to comply, although by this time I knew that something very unusual and perhaps dangerous was going on. The truck carried me out past a large cemetery at the edge of town and I recall thinking that this would be an appropriate place for them to kill me if that was their purpose. But we passed on and eventually drove into a large ammunition storage area about 15 miles outside the city.

I was escorted into one of the buildings and immediately recognized another captive, General Sing Rattanasamay, who had been arrested and taken from his home while still in his pajamas. General Rattanasamay told me later that upon seeing me enter in full uniform, he immediately concluded that I was a key figure in the *coup*.

I decided that my best course of action at the time was to remain silent, speak to no one, and just observe what was going on. My captors made no attempt to engage me in conversation anyway. Soon, General Rattanasamay ordered one of the paratroopers to bring him a radio. This was done and we listened to Kong Le's announcement of the *coup* and its objectives. This was our first clear knowledge of what was happening.

About ten o'clock, with no explanation, a jeep pulled up outside and one of Kong Le's lieutenants entered. He told me he was taking me to the defense ministry in Vientiane. Upon arriving at the defense ministry I was told by two or three of Kong Le's lieutenants—I never did see Kong Le himself—that their movement required some advice on how to proceed, on how to govern the country, and that none of the officers they had arrested would cooperate. One of these young officers had formerly commanded a tank section in my squadron. He explained, as best he could, the aims of the *coup*, that it wanted to end the killing of Lao by Lao and to return to the neutralism and coalition of the former government.

He said that they had already decided that they would not change the structure of the government and would not overthrow the monarchy. They only wanted Laos to pursue a neutral course. I told them that if that is what they wanted, they should seek the help of Souvanna Phouma, who was speaker of the national assembly at the time. He was the only senior, experienced public official who was committed to neutralism and a coalition with the NLHS.

Then I asked them some questions. I asked what they intended with regard to the foreigners in Laos, the Americans, French, and all the rest. They answered that they would restrict all their movement and activity and probably arrest them all. I strongly counseled against this; I told them that they must observe all the legal requirements of diplomatic status and not interfere with the foreigners. When I asked about their plans for the economic and commercial life of the country, it became clear they they had no idea at all of economic planning, other than to raid the banks. I advised them to move carefully in this field and do nothing to disrupt the economic system or the flow of foreign aid.

After this brief discussion they sent me back to the ammunition dump. Although I was in no way happy about the way they were treating me, I was somewhat gratified that they had acted on the advice I had given them. They did enlist the services of Souvanna Phouma, they did not harass the foreigners, and they did not interfere with the economy of the country.

After three days and nights at the ammunition dump, the same lieutenant who had escorted me on the previous occasions, brought me back to my home under guard. In the little group that was to remain under arrest in my home for two weeks were three other officers: Major Thamthack, the G-4; Major Bounneth, the director of military security; and Major Tham Sayasithsena who was the chief of ordnance.<sup>1</sup> At the end of this period of house-arrest, we were taken to the security section of the *coup* headquarters for a brief wait and then placed in a jeep and driven to a farm northwest of Vientiane. No one told us what was going to happen next.

At the farm we met some NLHS people who had been arrested and later released during the Phoui period. Together we walked through the fields to a nearby village that had been occupied by the Pathet Lao since the *coup*. One of the Pathet Lao we met in the village was Phoun Sipraseuth, who is now deputy prime minister and minister of foreign affairs in the Communist government of Laos. I had known Phoun Sipraseuth for several years; he had joined the Lao Issara long after we had organized it, however.<sup>2</sup> He wanted to talk politics with me on this occasion, but I refused. Tham Sayasithsena obliged him, however.

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<sup>1</sup>Tham Sayasithsena had had his ups and downs. One of the original Lao Issara members, he had been the deputy minister of defense in the short-lived Lao Issara government. Later he had led a rather obscure life, but entered into the lumber business. Still later he joined the Army at the rank of sergeant and rose to be the chief of ordnance. He maintained, however, his lumber and other business interests.

<sup>2</sup>In 1956, when I was the NLA spokesman at meetings of the International Control Commission, Phoun Sipraseuth was the Pathet Lao military representative. These meetings were conducted in French, and since Phoun Sipraseuth's French was not very good, he asked me to interpret for him at these confrontations. It was quite beyond the understanding of the ICC members to see the Lao Army delegate interpreting the statements, arguments and accusations of his opponent, the Pathet Lao delegate.

When we reached the village the people brought us some food and we were taken to a large house where we spent the night guarded by about a company of Pathet Lao. It happened that Tham Sayasithsena knew the owner of the house, for they had had some business dealings. Although the owner was not at home, his wife was and she agreed to take a letter from us to our families in Vientiane, for at this time they didn't know what had happened to us.

The next morning we were marched through the rice fields to the next village. Following at a safe distance was Tham's friend's wife. When she saw that we were being placed under guard in a small farm building in the middle of a rice paddy, she returned to Vientiane and again told our families. We were kept in this little building for two nights. We found out later that it was very close to a secret Pathet Lao base camp.

Meanwhile, back in Vientiane our wives had gone to see Souvanna Phouma and Colonel Kouprasith Abhay, Commander of Military Region V, and complained about our treatment by Kong Le. After all, we were not criminals and even if we had been, there was no legal or moral reason why he should turn us over to the Pathet Lao. Souvanna Phouma agreed and ordered Kong Le to return us to our homes. So, after two anxious nights under Pathet Lao guard in a rice field, we were returned home, again by the same Kong Le lieutenant.

Upon arriving home, I was told to report to my office. This I did, but I saw no one there. There was no activity there at all. Meanwhile Colonel Kouprasith Abhay had suggested to Souvanna Phouma that it would be best for all concerned, during this unsettled time, if the NLA officers, myself included, who had been arrested by Kong Le, be sent out of the country for awhile. Kouprasith explained this to me. He told me that he knew that eventually he would have to move against Kong Le and restore lawful authority to the country, but that the time was not yet ripe. Accordingly, five of us were assigned as attaches in Japan, Paris, Bangkok and Saigon; I was told to replace our attache in Phnom Penh.

When Kong Le acted, the Thai government had immediately closed the frontier and would ship no more rice to Vientiane. Prince Sihanouk immediately came to the rescue offering rice and dried fish from Cambodia.

We had a DC-4 assigned to the fish and rice run to Phnom Penh and Kouprasith told me to pack up my family and fly there immediately. This I did, and it was a great and unpleasant surprise to our resident attache in Phnom Penh, who had been appointed by Phoumi Nosavan, when I arrived on the scene.

### *The Counter-Coup*

When Captain Kong Le launched this *coup d'etat* on 9 August 1960, General Phoumi Nosavan was in Luang Prabang conferring with the king on arrangements for the funeral of the king's father who had died the previous year. Although Phoumi Nosavan was capable of rash and unreasoned action at times, he was certainly decisive. Upon learning of the *coup*, he wasted no time in deciding to oppose it. Phoumi's power base was Savannakhet and that is where he flew to begin preparations for the counter-*coup*. Enroute to Savannakhet, however, Phoumi visited his cousin, Marshal Sarit Thanarat, the prime minister of Thailand in Bangkok. It is not clear what if anything Phoumi gained other than advice from his meeting with Sarit, but Thailand's support for the anti-Communist stance of Phoumi's soon-to-be-established Revolutionary Committee was constant. In any event, Phoumi's decision to enlist major elements of the NLA in a movement to overthrow Kong Le was the beginning of the split of the NLA that persisted until the final take-over by the Pathet Lao.

The four-month period during which Souvanna Phouma was prime minister with the support and under the protection of Kong Le has been covered in many books and articles, so I will touch on only those matters necessary to place it in perspective to the period that followed.<sup>3</sup> I was, as I have said, out of the country during this turbulent time and can write about

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<sup>3</sup>One of the most succinct and objective accounts is in Arthur J. Dommen's Conflict in Laos, the Politics of Neutralization, Praeger Publishers, New York, N.Y., 1964, revised 1971.

it only from my recollections—I maintained close contact with the situation through communications from Phnom Penh and later Saigon—and from subsequent conversations with some of the participants.

On 17 August, 1960, Kong Le's Revolutionary Committee turned over the authority of the government to Souvanna Phouma who had been appointed prime minister by the king and whose cabinet was approved by the national assembly. One of the prime minister's first acts was to appoint General Ouan Rathikoun, who had been commander-in-chief, to be minister of defense. General Rathikoun had been a close associate of General Phoumi Nosavan, was a member of the CDNI, and Souvanna Phouma hoped that General Rathikoun could bring about a bloodless reconciliation between the army units that followed Kong Le and those that were joining General Phoumi Nosavan. Interestingly enough, Kong Le was remotely related by marriage to General Rathikoun.

The trouble with Souvanna Phouma's idea was that when Kong Le began collaborating with the Pathet Lao, not even General Rathikoun would be able to draw General Phoumi Nosavan and his followers back into a coalition with Kong Le. Most NLA officers, even some who may have sympathized with Kong Le's motives, regarded Kong Le's act as rash and undisciplined. For this reason, when General Nosavan began organizing his counter-coup in Savannakhet, he secured the support of most NLA units throughout Laos. Of course, some units in Vientiane, with the notable exception of Region V Headquarters under Colonel Kouprasith Abhay, had little choice but to join Kong Le's powerful, well armed and well trained veteran paratroopers.

As Kong Le's power increased with Pathet Lao and Soviet support, the chances of a peaceful reconciliation became more and more remote. NLA units outside Vientiane searched for ways to contact Savannakhet and offer their support. Meanwhile, Colonel Kouprasith Abhay, with his command reinforced by the technical branches and training centers, maintained contact with Souvanna Phouma and Kong Le and waited and prepared for action under the cover of a proclaimed neutral position between the two factions.

In Savannakhet, General Phoumi Nosavan, assisted by several leading officers began assembling a force from all available units outside Vientiane, principally units from Regions III and IV. As a former chief of

staff and defense minister, General Nosavan enjoyed a good, solid reputation and commanded a large and loyal following. While his own power base was Savannakhet Province, his movement was much more than just a southern or regional one; he had good contacts in the I, II and IV Military Regions. His greatest support, outside his own Military Region III, came from Region IV, the stronghold of the powerful Prince Boun Oum, the leader of the overall rightist movement. But even more than this, General Nosavan very soon attracted significant material support from the United States, delivered to him in Savannakhet. Displaying a certain apparent ambivalence in U.S. policy, the chief of the PEO dispatched his deputy and about 30 of his officers and men to Savannakhet to support Phoumi Nosavan, while the PEO headquarters remained, along with the rest of the U.S. mission, in Vientiane. Later, when General Nosavan began his offensive against Vientiane, U.S. Army teams accompanied the Savannakhet forces.

The situation that faced senior NLA commanders was a delicate one. On the one hand, a new government had been proclaimed in Vientiane, the king had appointed a prime minister -- Souvanna Phouma -- and there was a new minister of defense in office -- General Rathikoun. On the other hand, in Savannakhet, General Nosavan, the former defense minister, claimed legitimacy for his cause which was to drive out the usurper, Kong Le, who, in General Nosavan's view, was collaborating with the enemy enemy, the Pathet Lao.

One commander who managed to remain uncommitted to either side was Colonel Kham Ouan Boupha, the military governor of Phong Saly Province. He remained aloof from Kong Le, continued to resist Pathet Lao operations in his zone, enjoyed the support of the Chinese across the border, and declared his loyalty to Souvanna Phouma. But another commander who was remote from the scene of action, General Bounleuth Sanichanh of Military Region I, quietly left Luang Prabang and joined General Phoumi Nosavan. Still another, General Vang Pao, then a subdivision commander in Region II and an emerging leader of the Meo with U.S. support, cast his lot with the Savannakhet force.

Preparing for the offensive, General Nosavan's forces occupied Paksane, between Savannakhet and the capital, but in the only real set-

back of the effort, the 2d Parachute Battalion, reinforced with Pathet Lao and commanded by Pathet Lao Colonel Singkapo, came down from Vientiane and routed the rightist forces under General Bounleuth. The 2nd and 5th Infantry Battalions fled south along Route 13 and across the Nam Ca Dinh, the northern boundary of Military Region III, and established a new defense. The Vientiane task force followed to the river where it was joined by a company of Viet Minh. In October, the Kong Le-Pathet Lao-Viet Minh force broke through the Nam Ca Dinh line and penetrated about 16 kilometers into Military Region III.

Meanwhile, in addition to keeping a low profile while maintaining contact with Savannakhet, Colonel Abhay at Region V headquarters outside Vientiane continued his preparations for the counter-coup. In addition, he arranged for those members of the national assembly who wanted to support General Nosavan to be flown secretly to Savannakhet. This particular effort significantly strengthened the political status of General Nosavan's movement, giving it some added appearance of legitimacy. Kong Le was well aware of Colonel Abhay's activities but he did not have the military strength available to attack Region V.

While the opposing sides built their strength for the coming clash, Souvanna Phouma tried unsuccessfully to reach a compromise. Kong Le was being supplied by daily flights from the Soviet Union. The Russians even delivered a 105-mm artillery battery, complete with North Vietnamese gunners. The public displays of Soviet support enticed many erstwhile uncommitted Lao youths in the capital to join Kong Le's troops. They weren't the only augmentation Kong Le garnered. The Pathet Lao infiltrated hundreds of troops into Vientiane and these units coordinated with Kong Le in demonstrations. There was no turning back now for either side.

Colonel Abhay began the action with a brief attack outside his garrison on 8 December. The next day, a few loads of General Nosavan's paratroopers dropped east of Vientiane. A few days later, Region V troops attacked again and succeeded in occupying most of the city before being driven back in a Kong Le counterattack. The battle raged until 16 December when Kong Le began his withdrawal to the north. The counter-coup was successful, the casualties were heavy, but more important for

the future of Laos, another attempt at reconciliation and neutrality had failed. But most significant for the National Lao Army, a permanent split had developed in the army. From this time on, until the final collapse, the country would have two armies, the NLA and the Neutralists, and these two armies would be opposed by two others, the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese.

## CHAPTER V

### The Phoumi Nosavan Period

#### *Two Governments*

As General Phoumi Nosavan's troops moved north for the battle at Vientiane, Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma left the city for voluntary exile in Phnom Penh. Ironically, because I was still military attache in Phnom Penh, it was my duty to meet him as he arrived at the airport.

As the battle began in Vientiane, Quinim Pholsena, Souvanna Phouma's foreign minister, escaped in a Soviet transport to Hanoi.<sup>1</sup> Now the lines were clearly drawn. The Soviets threw their support behind Souvanna Phouma and his army, now consisting of Kong Le's force, which would upon an agreement between Quinim Pholsena and the Soviets, be armed and supplied by the Soviet Union. This would also place Kong Le in an alliance with the Pathet Lao who would share in the Soviet military support. The Americans were already supporting General Nosavan; the Soviet-American rivalry was thus shaping-up as a proxy war in Laos.

Souvanna Phouma refused to resign, even though the National Assembly, meeting in Savannakhet, passed a vote of censure against him. Meanwhile, the king asked Phoumi Nosavan and Boun Oum to form a temporary government. The Soviets announced their recognition of Souvanna Phouma's government although Souvanna himself remained in Phnom Penh. Meanwhile, Quinim Pholsena set up a temporary capital for the Souvanna Phouma government in Pathet Lao territory in northern Laos.

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Later, on 1 April 1963, Quinim Pholsena would be murdered by his own bodyguard in Vientiane.

Thus, as the new year began, Laos had two prime ministers. The National Lao Army, except for the small group that followed Kong Le, supported the Boun Oum government in which Phoumi Nosavan was now minister of defense.

From my own personal point of view, founded on my training, experience and my sense of loyalty that grew out of my long service in the army and for my country, I always considered the National Lao Army as the single lawful armed force of the state. The Communists excepted, I also believed that most professional officers shared my view. I found, however, that the Savannakhet counter-coup group had developed a different concept, one that was going to have a divisive influence on the NLA. They believed that their force was now the nucleus of the NLA; that it had gained the right of leadership by deposing Kong Le and that parliamentary proceedings notwithstanding, the Savannakhet clique would govern the Army. The former NLA—that is, as it existed before Kong Le's coup—was confused and disorganized and the Savannakhet group trusted only those elements and officers of the NLA that had cast their lot firmly with the counter-coup. In this regard, the Savannakhet leadership chose to ignore the fact that Kong Le would not have been driven out of Vientiane if Colonel Kouprasith Abhay and his Region V forces had not initiated and continued their action in the city.

The position of the Savannakhet faction was so strong at this time that it actually sent word to the senior officers of the NLA, through a ranking political figure in the faction—Mr. Neum Insexingmay—that the Savannakhet "government" would examine the records of all NLA officers to determine which officers would be integrated into the new army. This news came as a great surprise to us because we all thought that the Army was still the NLA and that we had never left it. After all, our commissions were signed and issued by the king.

Initially at least, General Phoumi Nosavan manipulated his new powers quite skillfully. For example, while Colonel Abhay's troops pursued Kong Le north on Route 13 and fought a series of heavy engagements along the way, General Nosavan consolidated his hold on the capital. The three infantry battalions that General Nosavan organized and brought with him from Savannakhet cleared the city and screened the population

for Communist elements and stragglers. These three battalions, under Colonel Siho, shortly took charge of the police force in Vientiane and exercised nearly absolute authority in the city. Answering only to General Nosavan, Colonel Siho and his battalions very soon began to abuse their power, mistreating the people, stealing from them, and conducting themselves in an absolutely irresponsible manner. General Nosavan virtually ignored the situation being created by his troops in Vientiane.

Although the National Lao Army staff was still in office, never having been formally relieved of its position and duties, General Nosavan ignored the established command and staff structure and appointed his own personal staff. Meanwhile, the king, on the advice of Prime Minister Boun Oum, appointed General Bounleuth Sanichanh to be army commander-in-chief, but he was only a figurehead; General Nosavan was really in charge of the army.

Demonstrating how little he trusted the Vientiane garrison, he moved the national military command to Savannakhet and conducted the national political and military affairs from his own residence in Vientiane. He established a special personal cabinet for this purpose and two new commands for his supporters; General Bounpone Markthepharack became commander of the Surface Defense Command and General Sang the commander of the ground forces—the "Armee de Terre." These were little more than paper commands, but since each of these generals was provided an office and staff, they gave status and employment to Phoumi Nosavan's friends and supporters. The Surface Defense Command had jurisdiction over all regional forces in the country, although these units actually operated under the orders of the sub-division military commanders. Similarly, the Armee de Terre commander commanded all the regular ground force units of the NLA—infantry, armor, airborne, artillery—while, in fact, these units responded directly to orders from the military region commanders for operations.

The military situation meanwhile turned sour as the NVA invaded and drove a column of about five battalions along Route 7 to Sala Phou Koun. Two NVA battalions moved against Samneua and the Soviet airlift continued supplying Kong Le at Vang Vieng and Samneua.

The NLA's 10th BI at Xieng Khouang, attacked from the east by the NLA and from the west by Kong Le, withdrew in disorder to Paksane. As of the first week of January, 1961, the Plaine des Jarres belonged to the Pathet Lao and the Viet Minh.

### *White Star*

Such was the confused political situation and the poor security situation in Laos when I received a message from a friend telling me that it was now safe for me to return to Vientiane. I landed in Vientiane, having flown from Saigon, in early January 1961 and immediately reported to General Phoumi Nosavan. I told him that I could be of more use to the country and the army if I were relieved of my somewhat useless attache assignment and given some active, more important functions to perform. General Nosavan just looked at me and said nothing. It was clear to me that because I had been in Kong Le's custody, had taken no active role in the counter-coup, had been out of the country during the fight for Vientiane, and furthermore, was not from Sanannakhet, General Nosavan did not fully trust me.

I spent the rest of the day renewing contacts with my fellow officers in the Army staff and visited the fresh battlefields around the city where the heavy fighting had taken place three weeks or so earlier. I also visited an American friend, who happened to work for the CIA and who exercised some influence with General Nosavan. I told this friend that I had returned with the hope that I would be given a useful assignment, perhaps a command.

The next day I was summoned to headquarters and ordered to relieve Kouprasith Abhay as commander of the 15th Mobile Group which at that time was fighting Kong Le at Vang Vieng, on Route 13 about 75 miles north of Vientiane. I was very pleased with these orders and although I could never prove it, I believe that my American friend was instrumental in securing this command for me.

The 15th Mobile Group was a light infantry regimental combat team composed of three very understrength rifle battalions, an armored platoon of light tanks, an artillery battery (105-mm howitzers), an

engineer company and a small administration and logistic element. My orders were to push Kong Le and his allied Pathet Lao force north to Sala Phou Khoun where the road forks; Route 13 continues north to Luang Prabang, while Route 7 leads east to Muong Soui, the Plain des Jarres and eventually to North Vietnam at Barthelemy Pass.

While my 15th Mobile Group pushed north, Brig. General Kham Khong was to advance with his larger mobile group from Paksane north along Route 4 to Muong Soui, then to attack Sala Phou Koun along Route 7 from the east. The Americans in Vientiane and the NLA staff were making wagers on which task force would be the first to reach Sala Phou Koun. The overwhelming odds favored Kham Khong, according to the bettors in Vientiane. Another task force was to attack south along Route 13 from Luang Prabang. This was GM 11 with three BIs and a battery of 105-mm howitzers.

I utilized three days following my appointment to command of GM 15 to gathering a small staff -- a chief of staff, an operations officer, and an intelligence officer -- in Vientiane, and then drove north to relieve Colonel Abhay. With two reinforced companies as security, I rode at the head of the column in an AM-20. This was an armored command car; it had an open hatch -- no turret. We bivouaced at Hine Heup, on the Nam Lik river that night, about one-third of the distance to Sala Phou Koun. The forward elements of the GM were fighting north of Muong Kassy at this time, still well short of Sala Phou Koun. The GM command post was at Vang Vieng, between Hine Heup and Kassey, but Colonel Abhay had already flown back to Vientiane.

The next morning our small convoy started north for Vang Vieng. As we approached a curve in the road only five kilometers out of Hine Heup. I saw that a potential ambush site lay just ahead. I ordered full speed to my AM-20 driver and we roared around the curve -- and through an ambush. The enemy fire was late and inaccurate and we made it through with light damage. Only five or so kilometers farther on, the episode was repeated but the damage was a little greater. My intelligence officer soon decided he enjoyed life in Vientiane a little more than the excitement of Route 13 and he disappeared.

In any event, I took command at Vang Vieng and was soon able to advance my command post to Muong Kassy.

The fighting was heavy during the weeks I held this command. It was during this campaign that I first became aware of a new form of American involvement in the war; the White Star teams. As I visited my forward combat elements I saw some foreigners among them. As I asked around no one could tell me who they were except that they were Americans who helped with air support and intelligence. When I asked my headquarters for an explanation I was told that these were the White Star teams. It was not until later that I discovered that the teams were made up of U.S. Army Special Forces officers and NCOs. In fact, one of these officers, Captain Moon, was killed in action during this fight along Route 13; I later saw a memorial to the 7th Special Forces at Fort Bragg on which Captain Moon's name was listed. During this period I had almost no contact with the White Star teams because they were always in the forward area, never at my headquarters.

The progress of our attack north of Muong Kassy was slow, but the leading 12th BI made steady advances. Toward the end of January, we had secured Muong Kassy, and we reached Sala Phou Khoun on 1 February. We made contact with elements of GM 11 a few days later, but General Kham Kong was unable to push into Sala Phou Khoun; Kong Le withdrew eastward along Route 7.

By this time we had severe supply shortages but our mission had been accomplished. We defended in Sala Phou Koun until the first week in March when Kong Le's counterattack forced us into a withdrawal. He was by this time growing remarkably in strength as new Viet Minh and Pathet Lao units were added to his force. On the other hand, GM 15 was never reinforced and its battle losses were never replaced.

Strongly reinforced by Pathet Lao battalions which were now equipped with new Soviet heavy weapons, Kong Le pushed us back along Route 13 to south of Ban Thieng. Following this reversal, my 15th Group counterattacked at night with the tank platoon in the assault and killed 400 Pathet Lao south of Muong Kassy. Despite this success however, we were not reinforced and were unable to retake Sala Phou Khoun. At this point, Kouprasith Abhay came north again to take command of the 15th and I

returned to Vientiane where for a month I was acting commander of Military Region V.

Under Colonel Abhay's command, GM 12 (the designation had been changed from 15 to 12 while we were at Sala Phou Khoun) was unable to hold north of Vang Vieng when Kong Le launched another strong attack. Vang Vieng itself was impossible to defend with the troops available. It was situated in a small valley surrounded by high mountains which the enemy controlled, at least as far as observation was concerned. We had managed to construct an airstrip at Vang Vieng which could accommodate the DC-3s with difficulty. When GM 12 arrived at Vang Vieng, the enemy was already behind it and had cut Route 13 north of Hien Heup. Colonel Abhay realized that his only way out was by air, so when he saw the enemy attack developing in sufficient strength to enter Vang Vieng, he had his brother, who was an aviator, land at Vang Vieng and fly him to Vientiane. The companies of GM 12 delayed at Vang Vieng and then executed a withdrawal, infiltrating by company down the Nam Lik River bed to Hien Heup, where the defense was stabilized.

While in Vientiane General Nosavan asked me to be his military adviser in the ministry of defense. It was here that I learned a little more about the White Star program. The first U.S. Army Special Forces teams had been deployed in July 1959. By the time of the Kong Le *coup* of August 1960, U.S. Army Special Forces teams were training NLA officers and men in weapons, maintenance and specialist courses at all the regional training centers. In January 1961, the French withdrew entirely from the training activity and U.S. Army Special Forces teams began to be assigned to NLA units in the field, giving advice on combat operations. In April 1961, with the advent of the MAAG, the Special Forces were named White Star Mobile Training Teams. I also found out that there were many more of these teams working in Region II than in Region V. It was in the Second Region that the White Star teams were working with the Meo people of Xiang Khoang and Samneua, assisting and supporting Colonel Vang Pao, who with this American support, was becoming the dominant leader in the region. Although Colonel Vang Pao's troops initially were as much a part of the National Lao Army as I was, they received special treatment from the Americans because they operated in this strategic zone in the

highlands along the North Vietnam frontier. Quite without the knowledge or approval of the NLA staff, the White Star teams also organized and trained Meo units outside the structure of the NLA, using cadre and troops pulled from the NLA. Gradually, six or seven regular NLA Meo battalions were drawn down to near skeleton strength as their personnel disappeared into the new irregular battalions. Since the NLA headquarters was not aware of what was happening, it continued to pay the NLA Meo battalions according to their original strength reports. Meanwhile, the Americans were also paying the irregular battalions they were forming. Consequently, the Meo irregulars were receiving double pay. The Meo had also received special attention from the French during their administration in Laos and they had earned the reputation of tough, strong campaigners, well suited to the arduous life in their steep, rugged homeland.

With American logistic support and White Star training and combat assistance, the Meo units of Colonel Vang Pao developed into the most combat effective elements of the NLA. This, and the fact that they operated in a zone critical to the plans and operations of the Communists, meant that they attracted major efforts by the North Vietnamese to destroy them, but although these efforts continued throughout the war, Vang Pao's troops were never subdued.

It was during this brief period -- after Kong Le's withdrawal from Vientiane and before Souvanna Phouma's return -- that the shape of American assistance to the NLA changed again. No longer feeling constrained by the limitations imposed by the 1954 Geneva Treaty and responding to the military crisis created by Soviet and Vietnamese support of the Pathet Lao offensive, the United States, on 19 April 1961 removed the civilian facade from the Programs Evaluation Office and established the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG). U.S. Army uniforms appeared in Vientiane and the numbers of White Star teams in the field increased as the Americans accelerated the training program, possibly anticipating the day when they would have to leave the NLA on its own.

By this time the NLA had grown to about 40,000 men; about half of the strength was brigaded into the eight mobile groups. We had more

than 20 infantry battalions, more than 30 volunteer infantry battalions, and 3 parachute infantry battalions. Command of the field forces of the NLA was exercised through three headquarters: the Northern Zone, Central Zone, and Southern Zone commands. Northern Zone Command had operational control of all combat elements in Military Region I, the major forces being the six BIs in GM 11 and GM 16. Central Zone Command controlled the combat forces in Military Regions II and V; the maneuver elements were five BI's in GMs 12 and 13. Southern Zone Command had operational control of the combat forces in Military Regions III and IV, the major elements of which were ten BIs and the three BPs brigaded in GMs 14, 15, 17 and 18. (*Chart 1*)

General Nosavan reorganized the entire defense structure in late April, an organization that remained until his departure in 1963. Besides the technical commands under the Ministry of National Security, he organized two major field commands, the Army Surface Defense Command and the Army Force Command. The former had administrative and logistical command of the BVs, while the Army Ground Force Command exercised administrative and logistical command of the GM's in the three Zones. By this time, the Vang Pao forces in MR II had been brigaded into GM-13. (*Chart 2*)

#### *The Cease-Fire of May 1961*

As the weeks passed in early 1961, the situation steadily deteriorated on the battlefield as well as in Vientiane. General Nosavan, who had gained dominance with the powerful support of the U.S. CIA and Defense Department was receiving less and less support from the Laos private sector and the civil service. Colonel Siho's special police force was the source of much trouble and dissatisfaction and General Nosavan often was forced to reprimand Colonel Siho. But the conduct of this special force, its involvement in gambling, crime and prostitution, continued to be an embarrassment often swallowed in silence by General Nosavan.

A rivalry quite naturally developed between Kouprasith Abhay, now promoted to brigadier general, and the Savannakhet group. General Abhay, as commander of Region V, was also Vientiane garrison commander. As

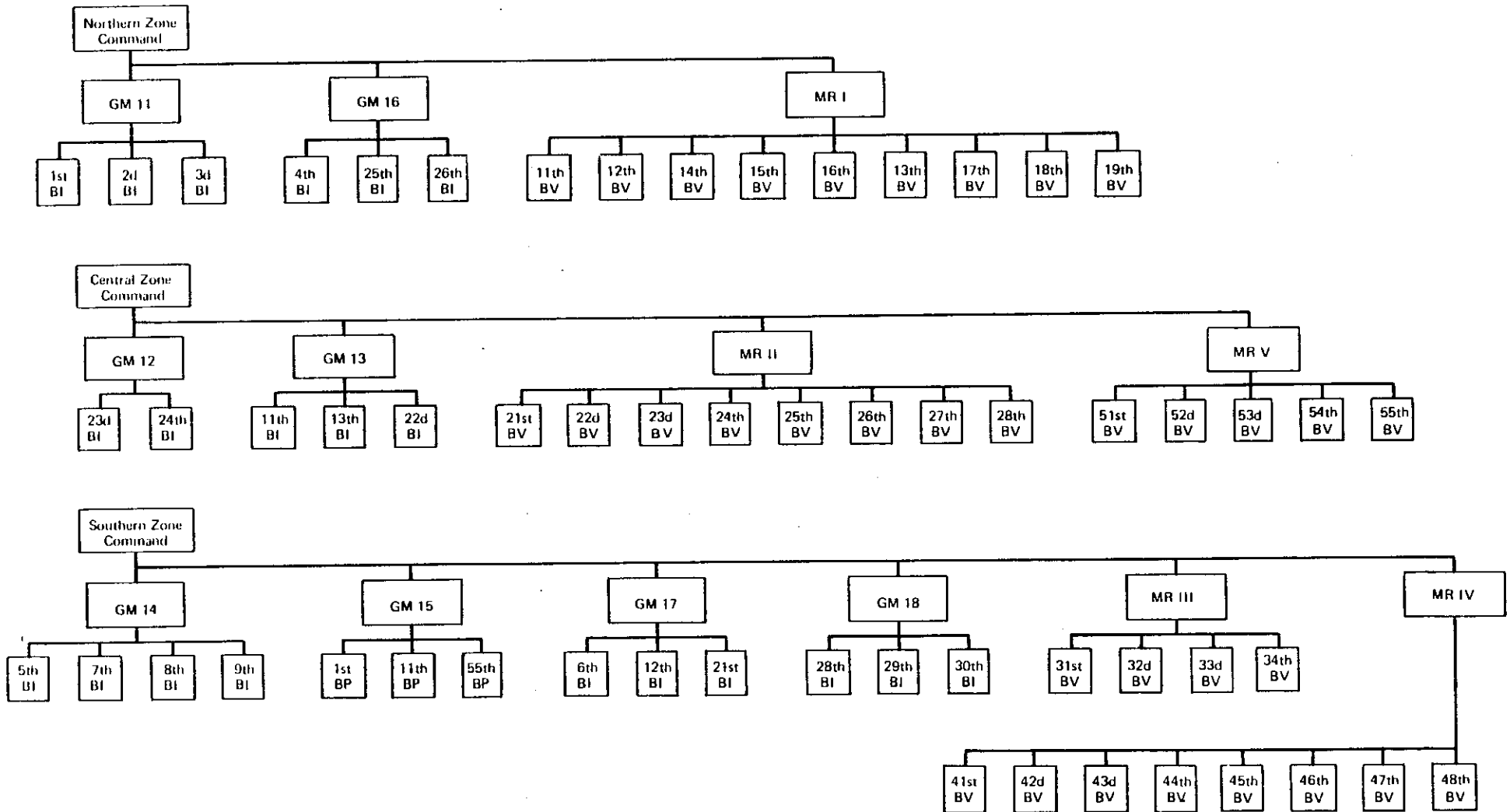


Chart 1 – NLA Field Command, April 1961

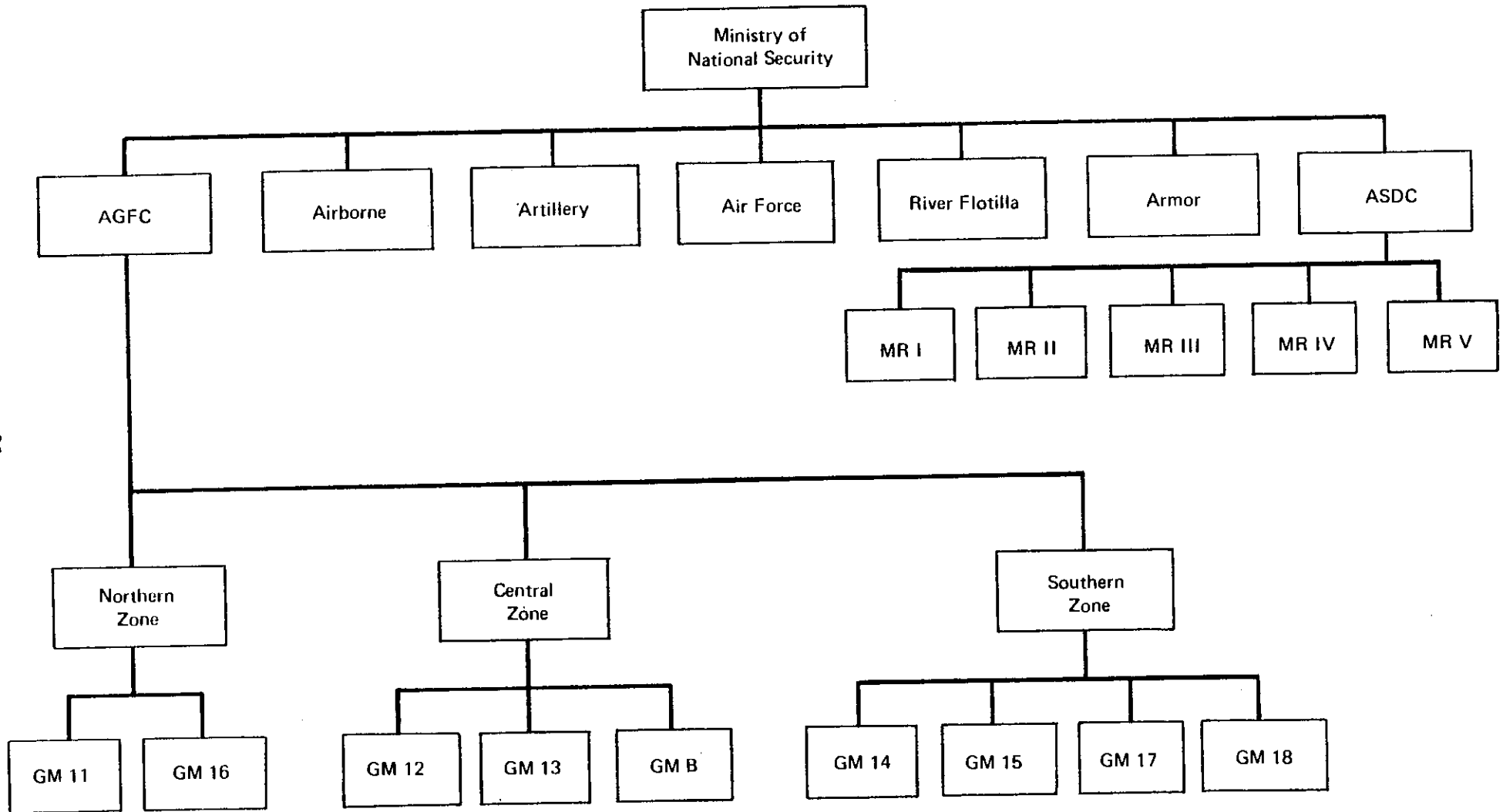


Chart 2 – Defense Organization 1961-1963

Colonel Siho and his troops declined in popularity, General Abhay and his Region V forces gained more and more public support. This enabled General Abhay gradually to assert his authority in Vientiane, a situation that General Nosavan and his supporters could not condone. After all, they were growing wealthy from the income of their enterprises, most of which were illegal and corrupt. On the other hand, General Abhay came from a very influential family and had built a solid base of support in the capital while commanding the Military Region V. Consequently, General Nosavan and Colonel Siho eventually concluded that the only solution to the problems created by this rivalry was the elimination of General Abhay. This they determined to accomplish whenever the opportunity presented itself. This was typical of the thinking in the Nosavan camp. The Savannakhet group had been supported by the Americans from the beginning and the funds it received from the U.S. agencies seemed to be without limit. Therefore, the Savannakhet group saw no need for seeking a compromise or political solution to their problem; General Abhay could be eliminated, the Americans would continue to give their bountiful support, and the idea that the support of the people of Laos was also important never seemed to occur to them.

Domestic events were not the only sources of trouble for General Nosavan, however. In late February 1961, Prince Souvanna Phouma, who had exiled himself in Phnom Penh, joined his half-brother, NLHS leader Prince Souphanouvong on the Plaine Des Jarres. From Khang Khay, where he established his capital, a stronghold of the Pathet Lao now reinforced by Kong Le's force, Souvanna Phouma redoubled his efforts to gain support for a peaceful settlement and a return to a coalition government. He already had support from the Communist members of the Geneva Conference -- the Russians actually had an embassy at Khang Khay -- and was gradually regaining American support. It was clear that the Americans were becoming dismayed by the series of Pathet Lao-Vietnamese battlefield successes, as well as by the growing corruption of the Boun Oum government. As American policy then shifted from the hard-line approach, General Nosavan's American supporters began pressuring him to begin negotiations with Souvanna Phouma and the NLHS with the view of recreating a coalition government in Laos.

General Nosavan found this a bitter pill to swallow. He had gained power through American support of his right-wing policy and now he was being urged to abandon this policy. Furthermore, it was obvious to him that if he consented to a coalition, he and Boun Oum would no longer enjoy the fruits of power, for it was clear that Souvanna Phouma, the Neutralist, would be reinstalled as prime minister.

Meanwhile, widespread attacks by Kong Le and by Pathet Lao units, heavily reinforced by North Vietnamese regulars and supplied by the Soviet airlift, were creating a crisis situation. By the end of March 1961, the United States government, fearing the imminent victory of the Communists in Laos, alerted sizeable Pacific forces for action in Laos and, at the same time, joined a British appeal for an immediate cease-fire. But the North Vietnamese and the Pathet Lao, perhaps smelling victory, continued their offensive. They wanted no part of a cease-fire at this time.

In March and April the Pathet Lao and Viet Minh launched two offensives to seize objectives in southern Laos. The first was a thrust from North Vietnam through the Nape pass, one arm of which pushed along Route 8, the other along Route 12 toward Thakhek. This thrust succeeded in taking Mahaxay in Khammoune Province on the Se Bang Fai River. The other attack seized Tchepone and proceeded west on Route 9 toward Muong Phalane, while another force turned south on Route 25 threatening Saravane. The advance on Thakhek was stopped short of Thakhek by the rapid deployment of a Thai artillery battalion to support the hard-pressed NLA infantry. The Route 9 advance was stopped by NLA units from the Savannakhet and Seno garrisons.

The Pathet Lao and Viet Minh forces had pushed the NLA units from the Plaine Des Jarres, but more than 8,000 Meo irregulars remained there under the command of Vang Pao. Meanwhile, in Military Region I the Pathet Lao and Viet Minh seized Muong Sai, north of Luang Prabang in late April. This cut direct land communications between Luang Prabang and Phong Saly and Nam Tha Provinces. Furthermore, it provided the enemy with an airhead to support operations against Nam Tha and down the Nam Beng Valley. A successful offensive in this direction could cut off the entire north. When Muong Sai fell, the NLA garrison fled

all the way south across the Mekong to Pak Beng. Meanwhile, a Pathet Lao company occupied Nam Tha.

Finally, the Soviet government agreed to the British position regarding a cease-fire before the reconvening of the Geneva Conference and on 24 April, 1961; a British-Soviet announcement to the effect that the conference would meet in Geneva on 12 May was issued. The co-chairman -- the Soviet Union and United Kingdom -- urged the combatants in Laos to cease firing before that date; invite the signatories to the 1954 treaty, plus Thailand, Burma and the three ICC countries to attend; and asked the ICC to resume its functions in Laos.

During the week following the joint British-Soviet announcement, the Pathet Lao broadcast that their forces would initiate a cease-fire on 3 May at eight in the morning. The Boun Oum government also agreed to cease firing on that date. These announcements, however, had little practical effect; on 3 May, the Pathet Lao attacked and seized Muong Phalane in Savannakhet Province.

On Route 13 between Vientiane and Luang Prabang, the fierce fighting that had characterized the struggle between the Pathet Lao-supported Neutralists and the NLA had gradually reduced to mortar and artillery exchanges where the Nam Lik River separated the two forces. From the south bank of the river the NLA positions looked across to the Kong Le fortifications on the opposite bank. The abandoned houses and overgrown gardens of the small village of Ban Hine Heup spread out on both sides of the river and along Route 13. Before the battle, Ban Hine Heup was a roadside town of about fifty houses where travelers between Luang Prabang and Vientiane would stop for fuel, food and drink before pushing on to Luang Prabang more than 100 miles north, or south to Vientiane about sixty miles away. Now, after heavy artillery and mortar bombardments, most of Ban Hine Heup's villagers had departed and the jungle was taking over the town. Only a few remaining houses and scattered fruit trees gave evidence that a real inhabited town had ever existed there. Some soldiers' families had settled among the ruins, scraping out a living by selling a few necessities and food items to the soldiers.

Ban Hine Heup had long been considered a strategic site in the defense of Vientiane from the north. A long military bridge had been

constructed there during the French days and a company of infantry had always been posted there by the NLA. In fact, in 1951 I commanded the company of the 1st Lao Infantry Battalion that secured the bridge.

In the first week of May, 1961, I learned that I would be visiting Hine Heup again. Phoumi Nosavan had finally succumbed to heavy American pressure and agreed, reluctantly, to send a military delegation to meet with the enemy regarding a more permanent cease-fire. The place chosen was Hine Heup because the front was stabilized and easily recognized there.

There was no attempt to keep the proposed meeting secret and when representatives of the press discovered the plan, they all wanted to go along and record the historic event. The principals and their assistants chosen by General Nosavan to represent him at Hine Heup were few. The chief of our delegation was General Sing Rattanasamay, the former defense minister of the Lao Issara period who had been arrested with me during the Kong Le *coup*; he was assisted by Colonel Bounthieng Venevongsos, who was now on General Nosavan's staff and who had been on General Sing's staff in the Lao Issara government; by Police Colonel Bounlith Oudanonh; and by myself as chief military negotiator. We also took along two aides as secretaries, but the press delegation that followed us to Hine Heup far outnumbered the official party.

On 5 May 1961 we all flew by helicopter from Vientiane to Hine Heup. As we landed on the helicopter pad, the Lao Army unit in the position sent a soldier to notify the other side that we had arrived and a guide escorted us down the river bank about a kilometer from where we landed. There we were provided a small boat for the crossing because the bridge had long since been destroyed during the battle. The army of reporters and cameramen could not accompany us to the other side but followed us with their binoculars.

The current was very swift at this point where the river was about 300 meters wide. Upon landing on the opposite shore, we left the boat and walked along a narrow jungle track toward the nearby village. It was very quiet and no one appeared to meet us. Eventually a villager approached and we told him what we were there for. I knew this terrain



Ban Hine Heup  
A View of the Destroyed Bridge on Route 13 and  
Part of the Village on the North, Pathet Lao, Bank of the Nam Lik

very well for not only had I commanded an infantry company here ten years before, but when I had commanded the 15th Mobile Group in the pursuit of Kong Le we were hit by our first ambush not far from this site.

We were all anxious to see what kind of reception we would receive and who the enemy's negotiators would be; would they be Neutralists of Kong Le or would they be Pathet Lao? Our answer was not long in coming. After a five-minute walk we entered the village and were greeted by three men who stepped from behind a bush. Two wore the camouflage jungle uniform of Kong Le's paratroopers, and the other was in the tan shirt and trousers of the Pathet Lao.

There was something very familiar to me about the Pathet Lao member who took great pains to convince us that he was not the leader of the trio, but only the Pathet Lao delegate, while the other two represented the Neutralists. After discussing the main purpose of our meeting, which was to agree on a site for future discussions, we settled on Ban Namone, deep in Pathet Lao territory about 35 miles north of Hine Heup.

This issue decided, our talks went to other things and it was then that I recognized the Pathet Lao representative. In 1939, during the Thai-French border clashes, this man and I had been in high school together in Vientiane and had crossed the Mekong one night to make contact with the Thai military authorities. After the brief border war was over, I had fled to Thailand with the Lao nationalist movement, while my friend had remained in Laos. I discovered later that he had joined the Lao Issara in 1945 and had eventually become associated with the Vietnamese-dominated branch of the movement. There, on the banks of the Nam Lik, he reminded me of our old nationalist struggle for independence and asked me not to forget our former ideology. I took the opportunity to ask him about the whereabouts and fortunes of the many other old Lao Issara comrades who were now with the Pathet Lao.

Our mission accomplished, we crossed the river and walked back into the ruins of Hine Heup where we were immediately assailed by the questions of the reporters and the demands of the cameramen. We then boarded our helicopters and flew back to Vientiane to report the essence of the agreement to Phoumi Nosavan. After studying the proposal to continue



Newsmen Accompany General Sing Rattanasamay and Party from the Helicopter Pad to the Crossing Site at Ban Hine Heup



The Party Descends Through the Village to the Nam Lik



General Sing Rattanasamay waits while a National Lao Army Soldier  
Explains the Route to the Crossing Site on the Nam Lik

the talks with the Pathet Lao and Neutralists in Ban Namone, the Vientiane government agreed and announced the decision to the Geneva signatories and to the press.

*Approach to a New Coalition*

Considering that we were about to embark on a course that would involve consideration of issues critical to the security and very existence of the nation, the government decided to form an interdepartmental agency to deal with the negotiations. This was done and the agency was placed directly under the office of the prime minister. General Nosavan appointed General Sing Rattanasamay as chief negotiator because of his prominence in the Lao Issara movement; not even the Pathet Lao could fault his credentials as a leader of Lao independence. He knew most of the Pathet Lao leaders from the old days of the Lao Issara and the Neutralists would still respect him as a senior officer of the National Lao Army.

While our negotiators at Hine Heup had been required to cross into the enemy zone for our first meeting, we were not far from our own lines. Ban Namone would be a different thing, deep as it was in enemy territory. We were therefore pleased when the ICC asked to accompany our delegation. Although the ICC had been powerless to stop Communist attacks on our units or to prevent North Vietnamese intervention, the presence of its members at Ban Namone would at least guarantee the safety of our mission.

Our delegation to Ban Namone was about the same as the one that went to Hine Heup. General Rattanasamay was reinforced by some politicians for the political discussions and I was still seconded by Colonel Bounthieng Venevongsos to deal with the military matters. We flew up Route 13, across the Nam Lik and Hine Heup, and set down in Ban Namone on 11 May, 1961. This time our reception was much different than that which we had experienced at Hine Heup. All of the Pathet Lao and Neutralist delegates met us at the helicopter pad and hundreds of villagers had been assembled to wave flags and cheer the prospects of peace and reconciliation.

Our first meeting was devoted to formal greetings, presented in speeches delivered by each side. When this was over, we settled down to a more substantive session during which procedural matters were decided. One issue that delayed the progress of agreement on important matters was our insistence that the national emblem be displayed on the wall of the meeting room. The other side eventually agreed to this demand, however.

It is characteristic of the Lao society, of Lao social conduct, that a polite, respectful demeanor should be present at all times, even when one is dealing with one's sworn enemy. I found this easy to do, particularly because I knew my adversaries across the table quite well. The chief Pathet Lao delegate was Phoun Sipraseuth, the same man I had opposed -- and interpreted for -- in the negotiations of 1956 and who I had later encountered while I was in Kong Le's custody a day or so after the 1960 *coup*. The chief Neutralist negotiator was Pheng Phongsavan who had been minister of interior in Vientiane before the Kong Le *coup*.

The meetings were held in an old village schoolhouse, the roof of which had been blown off during the battles. The Communists had replaced the roof with a canopy of American parachutes they had retrieved from the fields where we had made our air-drops. The room was partitioned by a curtain, behind which sat groups of Vietnamese and a few Chinese who were writing and recording the sessions on tape.

The Communists made a great show of the support they were receiving from the Soviets. Each day their delegation would arrive in Ban Namone in a Russian helicopter, although they could have easily traveled by jeep from their base at Vang Vieng, just ten miles down the road.

Our meetings were generally cordial, and although heated arguments occasionally occurred, our informal contacts during recesses were friendly. Many soldiers, Pathet Lao as well as Neutralists, came to talk to us, to ask for information about their friends and relatives in Vientiane and to ask for small favors. Some of the ranking Neutralist officers, however, were still angry with me because of the hard actions I had commanded against them while I was with the 15th Mobile Group along Route 13. Others just wanted to let me know that they were in those actions and to give their views on what had happened, especially