



The Military Members of the Government Delegation to Ban Namone, May 1961,
From Left to Right: Colonel Bounthien Venevongsos, Major General Sing Rattanasamay,
Colonel Oudone Sananikone, Police Colonel Bounlith Oudanonh



The Principals at Ban Namone
From Left to Right:
Mr. Pheng Phongsavan, Neutralist
General Rattanasamay, Government Delegation
Phoun Sipraseuth, Pathet Lao

to tell me which engagements they had won. Many others, especially some of the paratroopers who had had little choice but to follow Kong Le's movement, came secretly to see us; it was clear that many were considering returning to the NLA and wanted to test the water. There were some who had served under my command in years past. These trusted me and asked me to buy things for them in Vientiane. They would give me money and I would return with their toothpaste or gold necklaces or whatever they wanted.

Because my Pathet Lao opponent on the military committee was an old friend who had attended school with me for years before I left for Thailand, we could discuss the most divisive issues calmly. Even when the other side used very harsh words against us, we managed to remain cool and unruffled. My deputy, Colonel Bounthieng, however, believed that my negotiating method was too soft, too polite. He preferred to counterattack as harshly as the other side attacked, so I agreed to allow him to speak for our side at one of the meetings. In this session, when Colonel Bounthieng finished his presentation, Phao Phimmachanh, my Pathet Lao firend who had been waiting to attack Colonel Bounthieng launched a very strong personal attack against him. This infuriated Colonel Bounthieng who immediately lost his composure and with it the argument. That was just what the Pathet Lao delegate wanted to happen; that was one of their favorite negotiating tactics. On the way home that day after the session, Colonel Bounthieng admitted that he lacked the patience and self-control to sit placidly while the Pathet Lao insulted him.

It is not my purpose here to record all of the events or to detail the tortured progress of the negotiations that eventually culminated in the 1962 Geneva Accords; that story is well documented in many official and public accounts. Suffice it to say that the Boun Oum government representatives met with the Pathet Lao and Neutralists factions at Ban Namone until September 1961. As the meetings were going on, the Communists repeatedly violated the cease-fire; ironically, the Boun Oum government had entered the negotiations at Ban Namone for the express and limited purpose of finding means to enforce the cease-fire. The Communists and Neutralists however, had a broader purpose in mind; they insisted that a political settlement be reached, one that would call for



The Conference Room in the School House
at Ban Namone During the Opening Session
The National Emblem is Displayed on the Parachute-Curtain
With Backs to the Camera—the Government Delegation
Under the National Emblem—the Neutralist Military
and Political Delegation



A Russian Helicopter Over the Landing Pad at Ban Namone



Colonel Oudone Sananikone (left) in Discussion with Neutralist and Pathet Lao Officers at Ban Namone. Phao Phimmachanh, the Chief Military Delegate of the Pathet Lao is Next to the Author



Mr. Noupbat Choulamany, a Member of the Government Delegation (right)
at Ban Namone, Explains his Point of View to the
Chief of the Neutralist Delegation, Mr. Pheng Phongsavan

new elections, a new national assembly, and a new coalition government.

Meanwhile, the Geneva Conference had reconvened in Switzerland and the United States was shifting more and more support to the idea of a coalition headed by Souvanna Phouma.

In late June, Prince Boun Oum flew to Switzerland and met with Souvanna Phouma and Souphanouvong. There, in Zurich, the three princes agreed in principle to a coalition composed of the three factions. This development was not at all applauded by General Nosavan. He clung stubbornly to the idea that American support, from the MAAG and the CIA, would continue and with it he could continue the fight against the Communists. He appeared not to understand that American policy had changed. He must have become disabused of his illusions, however, when President Kennedy sent Ambassador Averell Harriman to see him. I was present at one of these meetings between General Nosavan and Mr. Harriman in Savannakhet when Harriman pleaded in vain for Nosavan's cooperation in observing the cease-fire and setting up the government the princes had agreed to in Zurich. American efforts to pressure Boun Oum and General Nosavan continued through the last months of 1961 and on into 1962.

NLA Offensive Operations During the Cease-Fire

Again it is worth noting the ambivalence in American policy at this time. All available political pressures were being exerted on Phoumi Nosavan to refrain from any military operations that would upset the cease-fire. On the other hand, U.S. Army Special Forces strength had increased in Laos nearly four-fold; from a few over 100 in February 1961 to over 400 by April 1962. The U.S. had also arranged for NLA infantry and artillery battalions to be trained in Thailand. By the time this program was ended in August 1962, seven BIs and six artillery batteries had been trained in Thailand. Additionally, the U.S. had sponsored a logistics training program in Laos using Filipino technicians under contract. But more contradictory in the light of American political efforts to force observance of the cease-fire, was the continued active participation of White Star teams in combat operations against the Pathet

Lao and NVA forces. These operations took place in all military regions except Region V which was relatively quiet and secure.

While American officers and civilian officials urged the NLA to avoid offensive operations during the cease-fire, the MAAG and the White Star teams supported unconventional operations against the Pathet Lao and Viet Minh forces in Military Region II. Vang Pao's unit held, among other positions at the time of the cease-fire, a mountain stronghold at Ban Padong on the southern edge of the Plaine Des Jarres, southwest of Xieng Khouang town. In April 1971, bringing up pack-75-mm howitzers for fire support, the enemy tried hard to take this position but failed. The Viet Minh and Pathet Lao returned in June, this time with two 85-mm field guns. The Meo unit resisted for a time, employing its 4.2-inch mortar with good effect, but was eventually forced to give up the position and withdraw. Vang Pao built a new redoubt at the foot of Phu Bia the highest peak south of the Plaine -- this became site 20 -- and this position became a major training and refitting center for Vang Pao's force. Up until the loss of Ban Padong, there were no tactical units above company level in Vang Pao's command, but at site 20, Meo companies were organized into GM-B.

In the late summer of 1961, U.S. White Star teams assisted GM-B components in many operations against Pathet Lao and Viet Minh forces in the southern part of Military Region II, while other White Star teams accompanied battalions of GM 13 in its limited offensive north of Paksane. The objectives were to reestablish control over the Nam Sane and Nam Nhiep Valleys between Paksane and Tha Thom in Borikhane Province and to thus enhance the defense of Paksane. In July, GM 13 split into two columns of two battalions each and started north out of Borikhane town. The column on the west advanced on Route 4 and was halted by stiff resistance at Muong Huong, well short of its objective. The other task force marched up the Nam Sane Valley to Ban Man where it was stopped by enemy defenses in October 1961. The MAAG put the brakes on the operation at this point by limiting logistical support, withholding helicopters and airplanes needed for supply and evacuation.

Farther south, in Military Region III, NLA forces regrouped after the cease-fire to reduce the enemy salients in the Mahaxay-Ban Nhommarath

and Muong Phalane sectors. GM 14, fresh from training in Thailand, attempted to clear the Pathet Lao and Viet Minh from Mahaxay. U.S. White Star teams joined the 8th and 9th Infantry Battalions just before they crossed the line of departure. The attack failed (as did another try later in 1962) because the battalions failed to put in practice the lessons they should have learned in training in Thailand. They did not patrol effectively to find the enemy; they lacked discipline in movement and fire control; they failed to maintain contact between units; they made ineffective use of their heavy weapons and artillery; and the commanders failed to retain reserves.

In the Muong Phalane sector, GM 15, with three parachute infantry battalions, operated in large combat patrols north and east of Muong Phalane. U.S. White Star teams operated with the GM, which had a training mission in addition to its combat mission. It was unable to establish any firm positions near Muong Phalane or to enter Tchepone.

Military Region IV had been stripped of its regular NLA units to provide forces for operations farther north. Only a few volunteer units remained to defend the region. Meanwhile, Pathet Lao and Viet Minh units exploited the traditional antipathy of the dominant Kha tribe against the Lao to assist in harrassing the BVs around Saravane and Attopeu. The NLA responded by deploying some regular units, including BIs 6 and 12, back to Military Region IV. The MAAG, using the White Star teams, began a program to form Kha irregular units to interdict the Viet Minh logistics system in MR IV. In a space of six months, White Star teams had organized 12 Kha companies and had succeeded in keeping the enemy off of the Bolovens Plateau.

NLA post-~~cease-fire~~ offensive operations in the far north of the country were somewhat later in getting started. In late summer of 1961, the NLA had reoccupied Nam Tha town and controlled the Nam Beng Valley as far as Muong Huon, which they reoccupied in August. A Pathet Lao-Viet Minh battalion garrisoned Muong Sai. The NLA's GM 11 and a Chinese special battalion were near Ban Houei Sai. This was the situation when the Northern Area Command at Luang Prabang began planning two operations that would culminate in a coordinated attack to recapture Muong Sai. The U.S. mission officially disapproved of this effort because it would

be a flagrant violation of the cease-fire. Nevertheless, U.S. Special Forces teams were supplied to the participating units to assist them in the tactical operations.

The plan was rather simple in outline. A three-battalion task force, designated Group Tactic (GT) 2, would move up the Nam Beng Valley from Muong Houn. GM 11 would start at Nam Tha and move east to Ban Namou, clearing the area of the enemy during the advance. By the end of December 1961, both task forces would be in position to attack Muong Sai in a double envelopment.

The task organization for the operation in the Nam Beng Valley did not augur well for success. GT 2 was not provided an overall commander and staff. The commander of the 3d BI was given command of the GT, which included, in addition to his own battalion, the 15th BV (six volunteer companies plus five ADC companies attached) and the 111th BS of Chinese from the old Kuomintang. The Chinese battalion had pushed the Pathet Lao out of Muong Houn but did not trust the NLA.

A U.S. Special Forces team joined the 15th BV at Muong Houn in late September while the area was under enemy mortar fire. The 111th BS was also in Muong Houn and the White Star team conducted training in crew-served weapons and tactics during October and November. The 3d BI arrived in November and final preparations for the offensive began.

The approach march began in early December. Meanwhile, Soviet airlifts had reinforced the Muong Sai area with two Viet Minh battalions from Dien Bien Phu and many logistical sorties. In the eight months of operations that followed, GT 2 forces were routed on several occasions, the units abandoned their White Star teams in precarious situations, and the NLA forces eventually wound-up 100 kilometers south of their start-point.

The NLA offensive out of Nam Tha was not the debacle experienced by GT 2. At least unit integrity was maintained, although very little progress was made toward Muong Sai. GM 11, with the 1st and 2d BI and the 13th BV, and with White Star teams attached, advanced as far as 40 kilometers east of Nam Tha in November but its commander ignored orders to attack Muong Sai in December. The Pathet Lao-Viet Minh counterattack in January 1962 pushed GM 11 back to Nam Tha.

The Dong Hene ROCS

In early 1962, General Nosavan decided that the NLA should set up a new reserve officer candidate school primarily to offer the youth of the country an alternative to the recruiting drive being conducted by the Pathet Lao. Soviet helicopters were making frequent landings around Vientiane to pick up Lao youths and carry them to Pathet Lao training camps in the jungles. General Nosavan asked me to take the job of establishing the OCS at Dong Hene and I welcomed the challenge. Dong Hene, which had been an OCS in the early days of the NLA, was an old army post and village on Route 9 between Savannakhet and Muong Phine; the latter was becoming an important center on the Ho Chi Minh trail system. It was a relatively hot area, from the standpoint of enemy activity, and the men who trained at Dong Hene would find that their field exercises would involve actual combat with the Pathet Lao. Furthermore, logistic support of the school would be difficult because the Pathet Lao would find it relatively easy to interdict the road west of Dong Hene. Needless to say, the task facing me was formidable.

The NLA was, in early 1962, still in a disorganized, confused state. Kong Le's *coup* and General Nosavan's counter-*coup* had split the loyalties of its officers. Furthermore, when Kong Le pulled out of Vientiane, he raided the army warehouses and left the NLA with almost nothing. Consequently, the only supplies the NLA could issue me for my school were two uniforms per man; no rifles, nothing to cook with, and nothing to sleep on. I had to look elsewhere for support.

First, I visited the MAAG headquarters and told them of my problems. The only question they asked was whether I would be able to use American instructors. I knew that I would because I was finding it impossible to recruit qualified Lao officers for my school; the best Lao officers were

already serving in the combat units and would stay there because that's where the opportunities for promotion were best. Therefore, I accepted the MAAG offer and one week later two White Star teams—seven men each—arrived at Dong Hene with the first supply of M-1 rifles.

I had to seek another source for other necessities; I went to see a good friend in the Asia Foundation in Vientiane. He managed to get me bedding and cooking equipment for 200 students. The support was meager but enough to get started. Training began immediately.

The Special Forces soldiers of the White Star teams were enthusiastic trainers. For the basic subjects, such as rifle marksmanship, the Americans worked directly with the Lao trainees. When more theoretical subjects were taught, the Americans used Thai interpreters. Most significantly, the White Star teams taught a type of tactics that was new to the Lao Army schools: insurgency and counterinsurgency. Up to this time we had followed the French practice of emphasizing conventional infantry tactics. While the Americans conducted the weapons and tactical training, Lao instructors taught the courses in military discipline, regulations, and civic action.

The most interesting phase of instruction occurred when the White Star teams led the classes out of Dong Hene on the field exercise that preceded graduation. Unlike the usual field exercise wherein the soldiers fight a mock enemy with blank cartridges and artillery simulators, the trainees of Dong Hene invariably clashed with the real enemy, with real bullets and sustained real casualties.

During a six month period, Dong Hene graduated two groups of 120 officer candidates each, and with the expert help of the White Star teams, sent to the NLA officers trained in fresh concepts for fighting the Pathet Lao. But the greatest accomplishments of the U.S. Army Special Forces teams were probably realized in the Region II where they organized, equipped, trained and campaigned with the Meo of Colonel Vang Pao. Although political events—the results of the 1962 Accords—were to terminate the White Star program before its task was complete, the American soldiers that participated in it should be proud of their achievements. In a too brief period, they built the foundation of a skilled, resilient and tenacious fighting force that continues to resist the Communists to this day.

American Pressure for the Coalition Succeeds

In February, after more fruitless discussion between Phoumi Nosavan and Harriman, the U.S. cut off all economic aid to the Boun Oum government.

General Phoumi's reaction to the U.S. aid suspension was characteristically hasty and ill-advised; he personally held the portfolio of Finance Minister and he ordered the National Bank to print and issue bank notes to show the people that the loss of American aid caused no problem at all. Naturally, the value of the kip deteriorated; it fell from 75 to the dollar to 500 to the dollar within a few months. This meant little to the average Lao, however, since he had little understanding of exchange rates.

Still active among General Nosavan's advisers was General Sing Rattanasamay. General Rattanasamay had another idea to compensate for the loss of American aid; open up a large gambling center in Vientiane. General Nosavan, to his credit, resisted this suggestion for a time, but eventually and most unwisely agreed. All the Chinese in the city were mobilized to participate in the new casino and all kinds of Chinese and non-Chinese gambling games were introduced. Predictably, the poor people, who comprised the largest group of customers, uniformly lost everything. Very few gamblers won anything and many had to sell their possessions to pay their debts. The profits did not amount to much either and in no way did they offset the lost American aid.

The gambling den was not the only scheme General Nosavan and his followers devised to bolster their economic condition. One of the generals, Ouan Rathikoun, established an opium factory on the outskirts of Luang Prabang. It was in a small house, closely guarded by General Rathikoun's troops. I have no idea how long it operated there, but I first learned of it when I accompanied General Nosavan on an inspection trip around the country in early 1962 and was permitted to go inside. What I saw there were about 100 Chinese who I believed to be soldiers of the 84th Regiment, Kuomintang, who worked all stages of the narcotics trade from the tri-border area of Laos-Thailand-Burma and throughout Indochina.

General Nosavan also permitted anyone or any group -- be they Lao, Chinese or Thai -- to participate in all kinds of illicit business and trade, so long as part of the proceeds were diverted to his support. He learned how to manipulate his supporters, and they learned how to manipulate him for their own profit.

While General Phoumi Nosavan and his friends were trying to consolidate their control over Vientiane, resisting American efforts to get the coalition government established, the North Vietnamese were reinforcing in the Nam Tha region. Perceiving a growing threat to Nam Tha, and also seeing a chance to create an incident that would require the Americans to reserve their advocacy of a coalition with the Communists, General Nosavan began reinforcing at Nam Tha. During the last week of January he had the 18th GM, with the 28th and 30th BI, which had been recently trained in Thailand, airlifted into Nam Tha. These battalions were at full strength and were well-equipped. GM 15 arrived with three more battalions and two batteries of field artillery (75-mm and 105-mm) during February, March and April. The force was placed under the MR I commander, Colonel Sibarovong and in mid-February attacked east out of Nam Tha to expand the perimeter and reduce the enemy fire on the airstrip. By the end of the month, all of the limited objectives had been taken and American transports could land again at Nam Tha. Among the cargo they deposited at Nam Tha were three 105-mm howitzers, together with the Filipino technicians to reassemble the pieces.

Meanwhile, the U.S. was not giving up its insistence on the coalition. Mr. Harriman even enlisted the support of Marshal Sarit to help persuade Phoumi Nosavan to cooperate. The three met in Thailand toward the end of March 1962 but still Phoumi was obdurate. Perhaps he was still counting on the tense and dangerous situation at Nam Tha to bail him out.

Unfortunately for Phoumi, it didn't work out that way. In April, General Nosavan sent Brig. General La Pathammavong to Nam Tha to take command with orders to resume the offensive. Employing GMs 15 and 18, General La Pathammavong began the attack on 8 April. After gaining

some ground initially, the force met stiffening resistance and stalled. Meanwhile, the North Vietnamese continued reinforcing by air. After seizing Muong Sing, northwest of Nam Tha, they attacked Nam Tha from the east and west on 8 May and overran the garrison. General Nosavan thought that if the defenders withdrew into Thailand they could create the impression that they were being pursued by the Communists and that this would precipitate an intervention by the Thais as well as by the Americans, who by this time had deployed some ground forces to northeast Thailand. He ordered the Nam Tha commander to do just that. Leaving behind all their artillery, the survivors of the Nam Tha garrison streamed south and crossed the Mekong into Thailand. But Marshal Sarit was not misled by his cousin Phoumi Nosavan. He ordered the Lao troops disarmed and placed in custody. Only when General Nosavan personally intervened did Marshal Sarit agree to return them to Laos. Quite naturally, General Nosavan's reputation and power suffered greatly from this debacle.

Only a few days later, pressured from all sides, General Nosavan had to accept the inevitable. The three princes, Boun Oum, Souvanna Phouma and Souphanouvong signed the document establishing the structure of the new government; it was 11 June 1962. Boun Oum would retire, Souvanna Phouma would be Prime Minister, and Phoumi Nosavan and Souphanouvong would each be deputy prime ministers.

Meanwhile, in Geneva the conference was drawing to a close. On 23 July 1962, the parties would sign the protocol that would once again declare the neutrality of Laos and require the departure of all foreign troops. The American involvement in Laos would have to take on a new appearance.

CHAPTER VI

The Period of Escalation

The New Coalition

Shortly after signing the Protocol on Laos on 23 July 1962, Souvanna Phouma returned to Laos from Geneva, traveling via Washington, D.C.. In August he arrived in Vientiane and resumed his role as prime minister. His half-brother, Prince Souphanouvong also came down to Vientiane from his Pathet Lao headquarters on the Plaine des Jarres and took office as deputy prime minister alongside Phoumi Nosavan, who also held the portfolio of finance minister. So the second attempt at a coalition of right, center and left began. Most of the important nations of the world recognized this new government; the Soviet Union, Communist China, and North Vietnam each established embassies in Vientiane, joining the western powers that were already represented there. With the arrival of the Chinese and North Vietnamese, however, the Nationalist Chinese and South Vietnamese withdrew their ambassadors.

I saw only the beginning of this activity in Vientiane because I was selected to attend the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth and left for the United States that summer. Immediately following the conclusion of the Geneva Conference in July 1962, the United States mission in Vientiane began withdrawing officers and men from the MAAG; it had begun trimming the White Star teams even earlier in anticipation of the Geneva agreement. By October the MAAG was gone and its functions were assumed by a new civilianized organization attached to the U.S. aid mission. This new organization, which resembled the old Programs Evaluation Office of pre-Phoumi days, was called the Requirements Office and it was staffed by retired U.S. military officers, or at least officers who were no longer carried on the

active roles of the services.

While the United States responded to the requirements of the new Protocol on the neutrality of Laos and withdrew its military personnel by the 7 October deadline, the North Vietnamese acted out a shallow charade, pulling out a handful of "advisers", but leaving hundreds of officers, NCOs and soldiers integrated into Pathet Lao units, units that were supported and reinforced by elements of the regular North Vietnamese Army. By mid-1962, Souphanouvong had become little more than a tool of his North Vietnamese sponsors and an instrument of North Vietnamese policies, just as the Pathet Lao forces had become a vassal army of North Vietnamese aggression in Indochina. These facts doomed this fresh attempt at peace in Laos which was the central purpose of the new coalition.

Trouble on the Plaine des Jarres

One of the first indications that the partnership in Vientiane would not survive was the trouble that was developing on the Plaine des Jarres between Kong Le--ostensibly Souvanna Phouma's Neutralist military commander--and Kong Le's erstwhile allies, the Pathet Lao. Supplies delivered by the Russians, supposedly destined for Kong Le, were diverted by the Pathet Lao and it wasn't long before Kong Le was in a desperate supply situation. He appealed to Souvanna Phouma, who asked for help from both the U.S.S.R. and the United States. The American Ambassador, Leonard Unger, responded by authorizing Air America, the carrier on contract to the CIA, to fly supplies to Kong Le. Air America was already supplying Vang Pao's Meo forces. The American support of Kong Le further intensified the growing confrontation between Kong Le and the Pathet Lao.

Despite the fact that the three factions--rightist (Phoumist), centrists or Neutralists (Souvanna Phouma) and leftists (Souphanouvong's Pathet Lao)--were supposed to get together on a settlement that would unify the three armed forces (NLA, Kong Le, and Pathet Lao), no progress was ever made. For one thing, Phoumi Nosavan actively resisted all

efforts in this direction, believing—and perhaps recent history has proved him correct—that any partnership with the Pathet Lao would lead ultimately to a totalitarian regime of the left. The NLA continued to operate under Phoumi Nosavan's direction, even though General Ouan Rathikoun had been appointed commander-in-chief and Souvanna Phouma retained the portfolio of minister of defense.

Meanwhile, skirmishing between units of the three forces continued in the countryside and the North Vietnamese pursued their extensive road-building program in northern and eastern Laos. At this time, late 1962, the Communist engineering and transportation effort was greatest on Route 7, supplying the forces on the Plaine des Jarres. It was fairly obvious that preparations for a major offensive to clear all opposition from the Plaine were underway.

From the North Vietnamese point of view, absolute control of the central passes into North Vietnam was essential to national security, and control of the passes depended upon domination of the Plaine des Jarres as well as Samneua Province and the border regions of Xiang Khoang Province. This strategy also suited the Pathet Lao objectives because if the time ever came when an offensive to capture Vientiane was called for, the Plaine des Jarres was the best of all possible starting points. Two major approaches led from the Plaine to the objective—Route 7/13 and Route 4—and Luang Prabang would also be isolated by such a maneuver.

The only obstacles to Communist achievements of these objectives were the Meo of Vang Pao and the troops of Kong Le. And now the Americans were supporting both of these forces. Although the White Star teams had been withdrawn, the U.S. replaced them with a clandestine CIA project we called "SKY." Both forces, Kong Le and Vang Pao, continued to receive their logistic support through Air America's transports.

By the end of 1962, Kong Le commanded about 4,500 troops on the Plaine des Jarres, but among them were some disaffected troops, infiltrated by Pathet Lao and responding to the leadership of Colonel Deuan Sunnalath, Kong Le's most important rival for control of the centrist forces.

Colonel Deuan Sunnalath was known as a fearless soldier of high ability. He had been a lieutenant in Captain Kong Le's parachute battalion and, according to some, was brighter and more eloquent than Kong Le himself. After all, he had come from Vientiane while Kong Le was from the interior of Savannakhet Province. In any event, as the power and importance of the Kong Le Neutralist movement grew, Deuan gradually began to assert his importance as a political leader in his own right. The Pathet Lao observed this tendency and exploited it by cultivating Deuan as a counterweight to Kong Le. While Kong Le tried to remain aloof and independent, and especially to avoid becoming too close with the North Vietnamese, Deuan sought Pathet Lao and Vietnamese support. It was therefore inevitable that a deep schism would develop between Kong Le and Deuan.

Kong Le, who had by this time promoted himself from captain to general, also commanded perhaps 5,500 other troops off the Plaine; most of these units were on outposts along Route 13 north of Vientiane.¹

The Pathet Lao had about 6,000 on the Plaine, plus about 1,200 more on the high ground around the rim. We estimated at the time that they had over 10,000 other troops elsewhere in Laos.

The Pathet Lao and Kong Le jointly garrisoned the Plaine des Jarres towns of Khang Khay, Xieng Khouang, Phong Savane, Ban Ban, and the airfield.

The National Lao Army, loyal to Phoumi Nosavan, numbered about 48,000 at the end of 1962. This total included Vang Pao's guerrillas.

¹In the early months of the Kong Le movement, Kong Le promoted himself and his officers. Later, after Souvanna Phouma assumed control of the defense ministry, he confirmed the commissions of the Neutralists. Kong Le wore the rank of major general and Lt. Deuan was considered a colonel. The king, however, refused to recognize these commissions and throughout his career, Kong Le was called "Captain Kong Le" by the king.

Another 2,000 troops, still technically part of the NLA, were under the command of General Boupha in northern Phong Saly, but since Boupha had made an informal alliance with the Chinese on his border and refused to recognize Phoumi Nosavan's authority, these 2,000 troops had no active role to play in the contest between the three factions.

General Boupha's was a curious career. He was known to be a very good fighter and in fact was considered to be a real favorite of the U.S. CIA in 1959. He was a native of Luang Prabang, a member of the CDNI, and a colonel when Kong Le was still a captain. He was never a Communist and fought the North Vietnamese in his northern province with skill and courage. But being so close to China, he pragmatically developed an understanding with his powerful neighbor. He even put one of his officers in Kunming as consul. By 1973 he had made an alliance with the Pathet Lao and represented an anti-Vietnam faction in the Pathet Lao delegation in Vientiane after the cease-fire. At that time he became deputy minister of defense.

But we are somewhat ahead of our story. Late in November 1963, an Air America cargo plane, while attempting to land at the Plaine des Jarres airfield, was shot down by Deuanist antiaircraft batteries that had been infiltrated by the Pathet Lao. They had fired on these planes many times before, but this was the first shoot-down. When Colonel Ketsana Vongsouvan, Kong Le's deputy on the Plaine des Jarres, tried to arrest the gunners, the Pathet Lao intervened and prevented it. A little more than two months later, the Deuanists murdered Colonel Vongsouvan, causing a permanent, irreconcilable rift between the two factions. Kong Le retaliated by prohibiting any Pathet Lao or Deuanists from entering zones under his control. The Deuanists then responded by beginning periodic mortar attacks on Kong Le's positions.

Very few of the original members of Kong Le's force joined Deuan's dissidents, but those who did were strongly reinforced by Pathet Lao and enjoyed the support of the Communist propaganda line that began to emerge. This was to the effect that Kong Le was never a genuine neutralist but was another tool of the Americans upon whose support he depended. Deuan was the true neutralist and the real leader of the Neutralist

faction within the Pathet Lao movement. This conception was carried over into the coalition government that followed the 1973 cease-fire in which the Pathet Lao half of the cabinet--eight members--included four Pathet Lao and four Deuanists. In this cabinet, Deuan became deputy minister of interior.

On 1 April 1963, the centrists continued the blood feud with the assassination of Quinim Phoulsena, the Communist-leaning foreign minister. This event precipitated two others: first, the Pathet Lao began their attacks on Kong Le's positions on the Plaine; second, Deputy Prime Minister Souphanouvong, followed shortly by his deputy Phoumi Vongvichit, departed Vientiane for Khang Khay, claiming that it was no longer safe for them to live in Vientiane. Souphanouvong would not return to Vientiane for more than ten years.

The Pathet Lao attacks forced Kong Le to withdraw from Khang Khay, Xieng Khouang and Ban Ban and reduced his control to the western third of the Plaine. He constructed his forward defenses just west of the Plaine des Jarres airfield and held on as the Pathet Lao, now joined by regular units of the North Vietnamese Army, continued the attacks throughout the summer.

Training and Other Activities of the Americans

In June 1963, I returned from Fort Leavenworth and resumed my duties as military adviser to Phoumi Nosavan and was soon appointed Assistant Chief of Staff for Logistics. While in this office I observed how the U.S. Requirement Office had replaced and assumed some of the functions of the departed MAAG. The Requirements Office received supplies for the NLA and for the Neutralists through Thailand and then redistributed them to the military regions in Laos. The distribution was usually made by land transport, but in some cases where the land routes were not available, Air America made the deliveries. To coordinate the logistics effort, the Requirements Office stationed small teams in the regions.

Our contacts with Requirements Office personnel at the headquarters of the NLA were primarily dealing with logistical matters, but the R.O. had also picked up responsibility for the training program. Lao officers had been sent to U.S. military schools for infantry and special warfare training since 1957. With the resumption of military assistance after the brief pause occasioned by Phoumi's resistance to American pressure, these training opportunities in the United States were expanded. The R.O. thus handled the dispatch of Lao students to a variety of courses in the United States. By this time, in view of the escalating war and the growth of the Lao Air Force, many of the student quotas were devoted to the training of aviators and Air Force technical specialists.

Since the number of students who could be sent to the United States was always limited, and because the R.O. could not assume the in-country training program the MAAG had conducted, some courses, such as motor and communications maintenance were offered in Thailand. Aviators also received training conducted by the USAF at the Thai air base at Udorn.

Meanwhile, the R.O. arranged for Lao infantry and artillery units to receive training at the Thai base at Lop Buri, north of Bangkok.

The R.O. was not the only American agency involved in training however; another training activity was being conducted by the CIA. In addition to continuing the training of the Meo begun by the White Star teams, the CIA was involved in a clandestine project training Thai soldiers as guerrillas to operate in Laos. I first learned of this operation when I accompanied the CIA station chief on a flight from Vientiane to Nam Tha. There I saw about a company of Thai soldiers in training and I was briefed on the program by the station chief. Since the CIA had started this program without the knowledge of the Lao Army staff, we were accountably somewhat upset by this revelation. After all, Laos was still our country, and we had a right to expect our sovereignty to be respected. After we were appropriately informed however, we agreed that the project might have some merit and could be continued.

In addition to replacing the MAAG, which had grown to a strength of almost 800 officers and men by the time of the signing of the 1962

Protocol, the Americans also increased the size of the military attache staffs in Laos. Besides performing the traditional reporting activities that attaches are always involved in, the American attaches travelled widely in Laos and freely gave advice and intelligence information that had been collected by American sources and means to the military region commanders and the NLA staff. They also advised on operational and logistics matters in the field.

The reinforced U.S. Air Force Attache Office helped the young Lao Air Force meet its operational and logistics demands with constant advice and assistance in the technical areas and sent Lao pilots and technicians for training in Thailand. They also operated in field locations and many of these USAF officers gave preparatory courses to Lao officers and NCOs who had been selected for training abroad.

The Meeting at Dalat

The scope and intensity of the war continued to increase. In January and February 1964, the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese resumed their attacks against Kong Le's position on the western edge of the Plaine, while North Vietnam reinforce its hold on the Ho Chi Minh trail area.

This was the general situation when one morning in mid-March, General Nosavan ordered me to join him on a flight from Vientiane to Savannakhet. I thought it was unusual when he told me to bring along some civilian clothes but his purpose was clarified when we became airborne.

While in flight toward Savannakhet General Nosavan told us to change into our civilian suits. Boun Leut (who was then Commander-in-Chief of the NLA), the other member of the party, and I did so while General Nosavan told us that we were not going to land at Savannakhet after all. We were going to the mountain resort city of Dalat in South Vietnam. This flight was so secret that not even the Americans knew about it.

Our Vietnamese hosts met our DC-3 at the airfield south of the city and drove us quickly through the lush forests and gardens to the beautiful, flowered city of Dalat. Here we sat down with General Nguyen Khanh,

who was the leader of the government at the time, and General Tran Thien Khiem, who was commander-in-chief of the Army. Our purpose was to reach agreement on military matters affecting operations and security of both our countries, for it had become painfully apparent that the North Vietnamese conquest of South Vietnam had now expanded into Laos to the extent that the well-being and future of Laos had become-- through the North Vietnamese strategy and American countermeasures-- inexorably tied to the security needs of South Vietnam.

The major points of our agreement, which essentially amounted to an informal military alliance, were that the border between our two countries was to be considered open to Vietnamese armed forces in their operations against the Communist logistics system on the Ho Chi Minh trail. Further, we would permit South Vietnam to post a covert liaison team at Savannakhet to coordinate these operations. In exchange for these considerations, the Vietnamese would help us with our growing spare-parts problem; we had a nightmarish collection of obsolete weapons and equipment from French, British and American arsenals and the South Vietnamese, having been similarly equipped in the past, had a large, though hard to ferret-out, supply of parts that we could use. Additionally, the Vietnamese would train Lao officers and NCOs in their counterinsurgency courses in Vietnam.

The Aborted Coup of April 1964

On 17 April, following a second meeting between General Nosavan and General Khanh in Dalat, I flew to Saigon -- taking my assistant G4 with me -- to work out the details of our logistical cooperation with General Cao Van Vien. Since the next day was a Saturday, General Vien suggested that I spend the weekend at the beautiful seaside resort of Vung Tau. This I was happy to do, but I wasn't prepared for the surprise that greeted me Sunday morning. My escort awakened me with the news that a *coup* had apparently taken place in Vientiane, but the details were few and unclear. He asked me what I was going to do and I told him

that I'd have to find out who was behind it before I could decide. He sent a message to his representative in Vientiane and we soon had the answer. Since General Nosavan's Chief of Security, Colonel Siho, and General Kouprasith Abhay were both involved, it would be safe and appropriate for me to return.

The day after I got home I found out that General Abhay and Colonel Siho had cooperated--a somewhat surprising event itself-- in placing Souvanna Phouma in house arrest.

It seems that the *coup* had multiple purposes. On the one hand, it was to demonstrate to Souvanna Phouma that he must consult with the right wing leadership more frequently and modify his approaches to the Pathet Lao accordingly; Souvanna Phouma had recently returned from another attempt to reach an agreement with his half-brother, Pathet Lao leader Souphanouvong. Secondly, so far as Kouprasith Abhay was concerned at least, the *coup* was a protest against Phoumi for allowing General Sing's gambling house and other social evils to persist.

But, with American support, Souvanna Phouma emerged from the *coup* even stronger than before. The king asked him to continue as prime minister and on 23 April, the "revolutionary committee" that engineered the *coup* announced that the present government--the coalition--would remain in office.

Souvanna Phouma at once reappointed General Ouan Rathikoun to be commander-in-chief of the NLA and himself retained the portfolio of the ministry of defense. General Rathikoun's appointment was illustrative of a central fact of Laos political-military life: a strong, resourceful man with a large group of influential supporters was never appointed to be commander-in-chief. General Rathikoun fitted the mold of the ideal commander-in-chief. He had been in the Lao Issara, but was never known for initiative or brilliance. He was from the Royal City of Luang Prabang and his family had served the royal family well. He was therefore considered loyal and trustworthy. He would respond to Souvanna Phouma's orders without question.

On the other hand, as a weak commander-in-chief he could not exert

much influence on the RLA or upon the powerful military region commanders who were developing into nearly autonomous rulers of their own regions. Thus, the aborted coup of April 1964 significantly reinforced the trend toward regionalism in the NLA.

Furthermore, another shift in power was taking place in Vientiane; General Kouprasith Abhay, the commander of Region V and the Capital Garrison, threw his support behind Souvanna Phouma, thereby weakening further the power of Phoumi Nosavan. Additionally, another source of support for Phoumi Nosavan had recently disappeared from the scene: his cousin, Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, Prime Minister of Thailand, had died the previous December. Phoumi Nosavan's decline was gathering momentum.

The Escalation Continues

The war was also gathering momentum in mid-1964. Although the North Vietnamese never acknowledged that their soldiers were fighting deep in Laos, even when numbers of them were captured in battle, the threat of a North Vietnamese offensive that might carry all the way to Vientiane was growing. North Vietnamese units were in Laos from the northernmost province of Phong Saly clear down to the Cambodian frontier, but most dangerous to Laos were the incursions along Route 7, in the Plaine des Jarres, and on Route 4 in Xiang Khouang. Both of these approaches threatened the capital.

The North Vietnamese also had established firm control in the eastern panhandle of Laos where their great logistical effort was surging forward despite heavy U.S. air attacks. In fact, rather than having a dampening effect on the North Vietnamese, the U.S. aerial bombardments seemed to spur them to greater efforts. To wipe out the bases, observation and communications sites the U.S. had established in Sam Neua, the North Vietnamese struck hard against Vang Pao. They even employed their air force in a bombing raid against the site manned by USAF officers and men at Phou Pha Thi and two of their old airplanes were shot down.

Before the U.S. air and guerrilla raids had begun to make movement along the Ho Chi Minh trail more difficult for the North Vietnamese, large convoys of trucks and artillery had moved south without interference. Now these large movements were often preceded by major clearing operations by regular North Vietnamese infantry. Furthermore, as the U.S. air attacks increased, the North Vietnamese were compelled to expand the trail system westward to multiply the number of alternate routes and to seek the passive protection of the population centers along the Mekong River Valley. They knew that the Americans would have to reduce the bombing effort to avoid excessive civilian casualties.

The local population in the areas occupied by the North Vietnamese was small to begin with, but many of the people who did not flee to government controlled zones were impressed into labor gangs by the North Vietnamese Army. They worked on the roads and carried ammunition and other supplies for the North Vietnamese. They were joined by thousands of civilians who were drafted in North Vietnam and marched into Laos to improve and expand the road net in the southern part of the country.

Another effect of the North Vietnamese occupation of eastern Laos is often overlooked by Western observers, and this effect was of greater long-term importance than the military occupation that supported the invasion of South Vietnam. It was the establishment of permanent Vietnamese settlements in Laos.

In order to ameliorate the chronic problems of overpopulation and underproduction of food in North Vietnam, the French administration of Indochina had permitted any Vietnamese who wished to cross the frontiers to settle in any part of French Indochina. Thousands of Vietnamese had, during the period of French domination, fled the poverty of their homeland and settled in Laos, most of them in the fertile Mekong Valley. Consequently, colonialism in Laos came quite naturally to the Vietnamese. Thousands of people who were brought from North Vietnam to work in Laos settled there permanently. They exploited the areas in which they settled, just as all colonialists have done all over the world.

The military convoys that brought the ammunition, weapons, fuel and supplies to the North Vietnamese Army in the south never returned empty to North Vietnam. The trucks were loaded with logs cut from the Laos forests and when the supply of easily cut timber was used up, they cut the bamboo. They did not stop simply at using up the forest resources in their zones of control either. In Attopeu Province they reopened old gold mines and opened new ones, shipping the ore back to North Vietnam.

Even Souvanna Phouma, who was always predisposed to give the Communists the benefit of doubt, and who never displayed an acute understanding of military affairs, could see that the North Vietnamese incursions into Laos portended worse to come. After all, the Plaine des Jarres was only an hour away by air from Vientiane and the North Vietnamese Army presence there was a direct threat to the capital. It was therefore possible for General Nosavan to convince Souvanna Phouma of the wisdom of authorizing a counterattack by the National Lao Army to clear the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao lodgements that blocked Route 13 between Vientiane and Luang Prabang.

With the assured support of the U.S. Requirements Office, the operation, code named "Three Arrows," would be the first large-scale NLA operation involving as many as six mobile groups (the equivalent of six regiments). It was also my first experience in an operation of such magnitude as the newly-designated Deputy Chief of Staff for Logistics of the National Lao Army.

Thousands of NLA troops in units, not in Phoumi Nosavan's Savannakhet group, had received no normal supply since the Kong Le *coup* of 1960. They were in miserable condition, without uniforms, shoes, weapons or ammunition. The R.O. secured canvas boots and new uniforms for them from Japan and began distribution. Enough materiel was gathered by the R.O. to reequip seven or eight GMs with all their requirements. The purpose of this effort was to reunite the NLA, equip a force that could reestablish land communications between Luang Prabang and Vientiane and restore civil administration in the regions between Luang Prabang and Vientiane. We tackled the problem by calling all GM commanders to Vientiane and having them submit their requirements. This accomplished, the R.O. went to work and had the GMs ready for action in about two months.

The name "Three Arrows" derived from the fact that the enemy defense at Sala Phou Khoun would be struck by columns approaching from three directions. The entire force was placed under the command of General Buon Leut. The R.O. supported the force logistically and prepared for the operation by repairing the Muong Soui airstrip so that it could handle T-28 fighters.

Battalions from Military Region I blocked on Route 13 north of Sala Phou Khoun. A column of battalions from Military Region V approached from the south, beginning its march at Ban Thieng. Another column, the largest in the force, was composed of GMs from Regions III and IV. It was landed just east of Sala Phou Khoun and attacked from that direction. The critical and decisive maneuver was carried out by a parachute battalion that was dropped in rugged terrain west of the objective. This battalion surprised the defenders and drove them from Sala Phou Khoun. It took about a month-and-a-half to complete the job, but by the end of that time Route 13 was again clear between Vientiane and Luang Prabang. Not only was this a significant military accomplishment with important political implications, but it enabled the NLA to make ground contact with and reestablish logistic support to units that had been cut-off for years. But "Three Arrows" was Phoumi Nosavan's last important achievement as leader of the right-wing and *de facto* chief of the NLA.

The Departure of Phoumi Nosavan

While the war continued to rage in ever-increasing intensity during the summer and fall of 1964, the three princes, Souvanna Phouma, Boun Oum (representing the right wing) and Souphanouvong met in Europe to try to reach a *modus vivendi* to end the struggle. This meeting, in late September, failed again. Souphanouvong left with the blunt statement that he no longer recognized the coalition government.

Meanwhile, in the face of important Viet Cong successes in South Vietnam, the United States stepped-up the air attacks along

the Ho Chi Minh trail, focusing especially on the Tchepone-Muong Phine-Muong Nong area.

Year 1964 passed into 1965 and the American air effort kept increasing. In Vientiane, Phoumi Nosavan was becoming more and more isolated from the power he had once enjoyed. He and Siho, who had been promoted to brigadier general, had made many unsuccessful attempts to be rid of their chief competitor for power in Vientiane, General Kouprasith Abhay. Each attempt had failed. Now they would again in a crude and blatant way try to dispose of General Abhay.

On the 31st of January, a force of about three light infantry battalions was seen by an aerial observer moving out of Military Region II and approaching General Kouprasith Abhay's Military Region V command post. At first it was impossible to identify the units but soon they were known to be National Lao Army units of Major General Kham Kong's Military Region II. What reason would they have to deploy against Military Region V? General Abhay naturally wanted to know.

General Abhay called General Nosavan, informed him what was happening (as if he didn't know) and told him to have the force recalled to Military Region II immediately. General Nosavan denied any responsibility for the maneuver and said that he was powerless to intervene. He advised General Abhay to be more skeptical of information coming into his headquarters; that some people who wanted to cause trouble between them were fabricating stories for that effect.

General Abhay was too smart to be put off by General Nosavan. Contact had already taken place between the opposing forces and this was only three miles from Vientiane. General Abhay knew General Kham Kong to be a rather stupid man who would doubtless follow General Nosavan's order even in such a bizarre adventure as this. But he still wanted to avoid bloodshed for as long as possible and to be sure that it was clear to everyone that he had not initiated this action. So he asked the American liaison officer in his headquarters to go out and verify that the force threatening the command

post was indeed from Military Region II. The American officer drove out there in his jeep and I, because of my past command of armored forces, was able to accompany him in one of the armored cars from armor headquarters.

When General Abhay received confirmation that the battalions of the Region II were preparing to attack, he ordered his artillery to take them under fire. This course of action had the desired effect. There were a few casualties but the battalions withdrew rapidly back to their home bases.

Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma was furious when he was told what had happened and he ordered an immediate investigation. It was discovered that not only were units of Region II involved in this attempt to eliminate General Abhay, but elements of Region III and the Army Ground Forces were also implicated. Three generals -- Major General Kham Khong; Brigadier General Lam Ngum of the Region III; and Brigadier General Sang of the Ground Forces -- all staunch Phoumi supporters -- were forced to resign from the army.

But General Abhay knew that General Nosavan and General Siho had not yet given up. Another attempt would be made. This final effort was launched during a typically Phoumist affair, a three-day long birthday party for General Phoumi Nosavan. This was a lavish party; all diplomats, cabinet members, army officers and prominent businessmen were invited.

Among the many conversations I had during the last night of the party was with a British newswoman who had been in Laos for many years and had many sources of information. That night she came over to see me, ostensibly to ask me for news of the fighting in the forward areas. She took my hand in hers and began to read my palm. She said she had read the palms of many important people in Laos and had found one common thread: fear that something disastrous would happen soon. Then she said that something drastic would indeed occur very soon but that the government would retain control of the situation.

I had no idea what she meant or to whom she had been listening. Perhaps she had had too much to drink. In any case, I left the party

and learned, when I arrived home, that an armed clash had occurred between General Abhay's Region V troops and General Siho's special police force. For General Abhay, this was the end of diplomacy and restraint in dealing with General Nosavan. This time someone would have to come out victorious, and someone would have to lose.

General Abhay pulled no punches this time. He even used his artillery against Siho. As dawn broke over Vientiane it was all over for Nosavan and Siho. They both had to flee with their security forces across the Mekong to Thailand. Phoumi Nosavan would never return.

Both Siho and Phoumi Nosavan were tried and convicted in absentia for crimes of corruption and misconduct in office.

In a tragic postscript to this affair, Siho consulted a fortune-teller in Thailand who told him that he could return safely to Laos where his former good fortunes would return. He followed this advice in June 1966 and crossed the Mekong, surrendering to the military authorities in Military Region IV at Pakse. Acting under orders from Vientiane, Region IV delivered Siho to Region V where he was briefly imprisoned. Then he died -- "shot while attempting to escape."

The Departure of Kong Le

Kong Le's turbulent career was also coming to an end. After constant fighting against the Pathet Lao and NVA, by 1966 Kong Le had been pushed from the Plaine des Jarres and was holding the small village of Muong Soui on Route 7 west of the Plaine. His force still maintained its separate identity however, and it was still being supported by the American Requirements Office. To facilitate coordination, the National Lao Army posted a liaison officer permanently in Kong Le's headquarters at Muong Soui.

The split between the Kong Le Neutralists and the Deuanist, supported by the Pathet Lao, was permanent, but it was not the only fracture in the neutralist structure. In the fall of 1966, another faction mutinied against Kong Le and he was forced to flee to France, never to return.

With the support of General Abhay, Kong Le's first successor was Sompeth, who had been an effective battalion commander. He was over his head as leader of the Neutralist army, however, and Souvanna Phouma, about a year later, appointed his nephew, Sengsouvanh Souvannarath to command the force. This pleased the Neutralists because they had wanted a leader of more seniority and stature.

Under General Souvannarath, the Neutralists moved their headquarters from Muong Soui to Vientiane and occupied offices in the NLA headquarters building. Although they shared the same support and worked under the same directives as the NLA, Souvanna Phouma insisted upon keeping the Neutralists as a force separate from the NLA. He felt this was necessary to preserve the legitimacy of the coalition government.

Nevertheless, we had come very close to re-integrating the old NLA by the end of 1966. We, the NLA and the Neutralists, had the same uniform and the same insignia, and more important, we were firmly united in our opposition to the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese invaders.

CHAPTER VII

Three Wars in Laos 1966-1973

In tracing the history of the development of the National Lao Army and Laos as a theater in the Indochina wars, I have described a series of episodes each of which had its own particular characteristic and influence on the broad course of events. The Lao independence movement, for example, and the way in which it grew into two main branches, French-allied and Viet Minh-allied, set the pattern for the years of civil war that followed.

The entrance of the Americans into Vietnam and Laos after the conclusion of the First Indochina War added a new aspect to the conflict; it brought big-power confrontation to the battleground of Laos. But in our view, that is, as seen from Laos, the fundamental American interest was in Vietnam, not in Laos, and it is likely that if North Vietnam had not required Laos territory for the support of its war against South Vietnam, the United States involvement with the National Lao Army would have been insignificant. But this was not the case, and the Americans passed through a series of phases in which their support of the Laos military took on different shapes and appearances. The long-term result; however, despite these episodic variations, was a second war in Laos; a war in which Lao units and soldiers, Thai units, and soldiers—regular as well as irregular—were employed essentially with the objective of interfering with the North Vietnamese logistic and infiltration system through Laos to South Vietnam.

This war, especially in Laos Military Region II, developed into a major conflict involving NVA divisions as North Vietnam sought to reduce the threat to its border and operations in that critical region. As the

NVA pursued the strategy of clearing hostile forces from its frontier in Samneua Province, the momentum of the offensive carried its army to the approaches to Vientiane and the aggressive NVA defensive strategy looked, as viewed from Vientiane, like an offensive that would hazard the very existence of Laos.

As these two separate but related wars were being waged, a third war was developing in Laos and North Vietnam. This was the U.S. air war against North Vietnam and the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The American aerial bombardment, and North Vietnam's defense and reaction to it, drew Laos inexorably and inseparably into the larger conflict. When we permitted the USAF to place observation posts, radar beacons, search-and-rescue installations, communications sites and other facilities dedicated to the air war against North Vietnam on Laos territory, we forfeited whatever meager residue of neutrality that remained. This is not to say that the Laos government and military did not benefit from the U.S. air power present in Laos; there were many occasions, particularly during the strong NVA offensives on the Plaine des Jarres, that only the application of heavy U.S. air strikes, including B-52s, forestalled disaster for Laos forces.

By 1966 the last international effort to enforce neutrality and bring peace to Laos had clearly failed. The civil war between the National Lao Army and Neutralists against the Pathet Lao had diminished in importance and visibility as the major conflict between the NVA, reinforced in some areas by Pathet Lao units, and the Laos and Thai forces became the major ground war in Laos. And this was managed not by the National Lao Army but by the Americans--the military attaches and civilians of the CIA.

The United States had begun striking North Vietnam from the air in early 1965 and began hitting the Ho Chi Minh trail in early 1966. Although American leadership appeared to vacillate between a hard, aggressive policy and a soft, conciliatory approach so far as the bombing of North Vietnam was concerned, the bombings in Laos surged and grew year-by-year until the final agreement was reached in 1973.

This eventful period, 1966-1973, and the way the National Lao Army was supported and influenced by the Americans and their policies is the subject of this chapter.

The Thais in Laos

Not only did the National Lao Army lack the capability to oppose in any significant way the invasion of the North Vietnamese Army in the Plaines des Jarres area and in the Laos panhandle, but Souvanna Phouma chose largely to ignore the Vietnamese aggression, particularly in the panhandle where the main trunk of the Ho Chi Minh trail system operated. This wild, sparsely populated, deep jungle had little practical importance to Laos anyway. Only the matter of the violation of Laos' national sovereignty by the North Vietnamese evoked protests from the Souvanna Phouma government and, as mentioned earlier, impelled us to grant South Vietnam a free hand in crossing its frontier to confront the North Vietnamese in Laos. It was an easy step to open this region to the USAF in its air war against the Ho Chi Minh trail.

Observation of enemy activities from the air over Laos was difficult at best because of the dense jungles, narrow chasms and caves, as well as the low clouds and smoky haze that often covered areas of interest. Therefore, the Americans had to develop some sophisticated systems to locate targets from the air. But even these modern devices which made use of radar and infra-red detectors were not effective enough to provide accurate, timely target information. To supplement the technological systems, the Americans had to have observers on the ground who could find and report targets for attack. This is how the Thais first entered the war in Laos; they were recruited and trained by the Americans to observe and report on NVA logistic and personnel infiltration from the passes in northern Laos to the Laos panhandle.

The employment of Thai volunteers and units in Laos was a natural development. Cooperation between Thailand and Laos in defense matters began long before it occurred to the Americans that Thais could be used as trail-watchers in Laos.

Thailand had always been an important and influential neighbor of Laos. The two countries shared common cultural influences from both

India and China that were manifested in languages, religions and social customs. The ethnic groups to which the population belonged were pushed out of southern China by northern invaders centuries past. But despite these common origins and cultural bonds, the association between the two countries was far from ideal during the first half of the twentieth century. Under the French influence, and reflecting the colonial competition the French felt from Thailand, contact between Lao and Thai living on opposite banks of the Mekong was not encouraged.

The Lao people became aware of Thailand as a good and valuable neighbor only when the French influence diminished and Laos became independent. Similarly, the Thais discovered quite late that the Lao were much like themselves. An incident that happened during my first self-imposed exile to Thailand in 1940 illustrated the ignorance about Laos that had grown in Thailand during the long French occupation of Indochina, when normal social and official contact between Laos and Thailand was severely limited. After undergoing the security investigation at Nong Khai, many of the Lao who had escaped to Thailand were permitted to continue on to Bangkok in order to find work. We reported to the government office there and identified ourselves, much to the surprise of the Thai civil servants who told us that they had thought that Lao people were white with long noses and blue eyes like the French.

There were also some negative factors that impelled independent Laos to seek a close association with Thailand; we had lived under French rule for more than half a century and many of the officials who governed our country were Vietnamese civil servants imported by the French. We therefore looked upon the Vietnamese as colonialists and also had some reason to fear a strong, expansionist Vietnam. Therefore, at the end of the French regime, we turned our attention to Thailand as the best possible regional ally for Laos.

Economic matters had first priority and Thai businessmen were eager to supply our needs. Practically all of Laos' imports, which included fuels, construction materials and food were transported across the Mekong from Thailand. Even imports from overseas had to be shipped through

Bangkok to Laos, since we had no port of our own.

The economic and commercial association was later expanded to include military cooperation. Thailand made the first overtures to Laos in this regard. In 1955 five senior Lao army officers, myself included, were invited to attend Thai Army Day ceremonies at Udorn, just 30 miles south of Vientiane. From Udorn we were taken to Bangkok to meet with the top echelon of the Thai Army. The purpose was to explain to us the new Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty and how Laos was protected by the SEATO umbrella.

There were no Americans directly involved in any of these early exchanges between the Lao and Thai military, but later American military assistance funds were used to pay for the training of Lao officers and soldiers at Thai Army schools and training centers.

As the military situation in Laos worsened during the North Vietnamese offensives on the Plaine des Jarres, Thai interest in coordinating with and assisting Laos in the defense of the Mekong region intensified. The Thai leadership, at that time Marshall Thanam Kittakachorn was Prime Minister, established a high-level defense committee for that purpose. It was around 1970 that I first accompanied Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma to Bangkok for a conference with this committee. There were several subsequent visits during which we worked out the specifics of the form Thai military involvement in the defense of Laos would take. Items discussed and decided upon included training for Lao officers, NCOs and units at Thai schools and training centers, and support for the Lao Air Force at Thai bases.

All of these meetings were without American participation, but the Americans had by this time begun funding the Thai assistance to Laos with funds appropriated for Laos military assistance and had also started the training of Thai irregulars in a camp in northwest Laos near Nam Tha.

Meanwhile, the Thais had sent a liaison team for permanent residence in Vientiane. This team established direct communications between Vientiane and Bangkok and placed terminals of this system in the homes of senior Lao officials, including my own home. Thus, the links between the Thai and Lao governments and their respective military forces were

strongly forged. Not only did this liaison team, called "Project 333" by the Thais, offer advice and assistance to Souvanna Phouma and to the National Lao Army staff, but it kept Prime Minister Thanam Kittakachorn constantly up to date on developments in Laos, political as well as military. Intelligence in this area had assumed prime importance to Thailand because as the North Vietnamese advanced in Laos, the insurgent threat in northeast Thailand increased.

By the early 1970s, the war had placed a severe strain on Lao manpower resources. The CIA support of irregular units--Vang Pao's in Military Region II and newly organized irregulars operating from the Plateau des Bolovens in Military Region III--had drained the NLA of many of its best qualified officers and NCO's. Meanwhile, the NVA was reinforcing on the Plaine des Jarres and in the panhandle. Its sea line of communication severed by the 1970 *coup* in Cambodia, the NVA had to expand the use of the Sihanouk trail in southern Laos and to secure this effort, deployed more forces to the panhandle. It was in this milieu that the Americans proposed, to the Thai government first, that Thai irregulars, formed into volunteer battalions, be deployed to reinforce the NLA in southern Laos.

It was apparent that the U.S. had discussed the use of Thai irregular battalions in Laos with the Thai government before the American ambassador raised the issue with Souvanna Phouma. Prince Souvanna told me that the chief of the Thai liaison team discussed the possibility with him before Ambassador Sullivan mentioned it.

When the Lao Army staff first learned of the proposal we had some serious misgivings about it. For one thing, we had no idea how the Thai troops would conduct themselves when faced with the powerful, artillery-supported, regular forces of the NVA. The Thai Army looked good in training; they followed assiduously the U.S. field manuals they had translated and their field exercises were text-book perfect. But they had never been tested in sustained, heavy combat. Besides, the force contemplated for deployment in Laos was not made up of the regular Thai Army. It would be officered by regulars, but the soldiers would be a heterogenous mix of volunteers recruited from retired ranks and the

countryside. It would be a mercenary force.

Secondly, we wondered if the Chinese Communists would react to the introduction of Thai units in Laos by sending Chinese volunteers to reinforce the North Vietnamese. That eventually would certainly create a new and more dangerous situation for Laos.

Finally, we were almost positive that Souvanna Phouma would reject the idea. He felt it to be of prime importance that Laos preserve the appearance of neutrality in the war the Americans were waging against the North Vietnamese. Even when his own Lao Army units were in danger of being annihilated by the advancing North Vietnamese, Prince Souvanna resisted permitting the USAF to bomb in support of the beleaguered units. The NLA commander in chief or his deputy had to convince the prime minister on each occasion when only the immediate application of American airpower would save the Lao unit. Only then would Souvanna Phouma permit this action which he considered a breach of Laos neutrality. The prime minister was fairly even-handed in his criticism of foreign forces on Laos soil, however. He equally condemned the NVA invasion and the South Vietnamese offensive into the Tchepone area of the Laos panhandle. In view of his political strategy for Laos, it was hard to believe that Prince Souvanna would authorize the deployment of Thai volunteers in Laos.

Throughout this period when the Americans and Thais were promoting the concept of using Thai volunteers to help stem the NVA tide in Laos, Prime Minister Thanom remained on close personal terms with Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma. Prince Souvanna devoted all his time and energies to his duties and from time to time needed a rest and a change of scene. Prime Minister Thanom graciously offered Souvanna the use of Thai facilities and resorts for Souvanna's brief vacations and the prince frequently accepted these invitations.

Perhaps Thanom's friendship with Souvanna was a factor in persuading the prince to acquiesce to the deployment of the Thai volunteers, but of more importance at the time was the growing NVA threat to Pakse, the largest town and most important military base in southern Laos. We in the Laos Army staff had unanimously reached the conclusion that the deployment

of Thai volunteers was one of the few feasible courses of action open to us to save Pakse and we helped convince Souvanna Phouma of this.

In late April or early May 1971, I accompanied Souvanna Phouma to Bangkok to work out the details of the Thai deployment. Along with us was the chief of the Thai liaison mission to Vientiane who briefed his prime minister of the situation in Laos.

The discussions with Prime Minister Thanom were brief and conclusive because careful preparations had been made before hand by both delegations, the Thais and the Lao. The Thai volunteer units-- two battalions--were ready to go and all we had to settle was where they would be deployed.

We agreed that two considerations would govern the area of deployment; first, the units should be used far from Vientiane to minimize the amount of information about the operation that would be available to the diplomatic missions and foreign press in the capital; second, the Thais should be employed in an area of serious threat. Southern Laos was the logical choice. Not only was it remote from Vientiane, but a new NVA offensive had on 21 May overrun Paksong on the Bolovens Plateau and was threatening Pakse.

The two battalions were deployed immediately following the conference and placed at Ban Houei Sai, north of Paksong. The battalions barely had time to organize the terrain when, the first night on the position, the NVA struck in force. Making skillful use of their mortars and fighting all night, the Thais held the position. When morning came, the bodies of two hundred North Vietnamese soldiers were counted on the final protective wire and some as far in as the battalion command post. This initial success greatly buoyed the confidence of the Thai officers and the commander of the Thai expeditionary force, an outstanding officer who had been a classmate of mine at Fort Leavenworth.

Following the sound military maxim-- reinforce success--Souvanna Phouma approved the Army staff's recommendation to deploy the next Thai contingent to Military Region II on the Plaine des Jarres. Vang Pao, commanding the irregular Lao forces on the Plaine, was being hard pressed

by the best troops the NVA had to offer. The NVA was making a maximum effort to destroy Vang Pao's force because it had been so successful in disrupting NVA operations in the border areas. Here was a chance to repeat the successful engagement at Ban Houei Sai in which the Thai volunteers had proved so effective and perhaps restore the lost momentum to Vang Pao's irregulars.

Accordingly, two Thai volunteer infantry regiments, with supporting regular artillery, were lifted to the Plaine Des Jarres. Confident of success, the force dispatched its security elements and began advancing across the open, rolling grasslands toward the enemy. The NVA, however, would not be twice burned. It was ready with its heavy artillery registered and its infantry poised for the attack.

The battle began with a very heavy artillery concentration, including 130-mm and 122-mm guns, pouring down on the Thai battalions. While the Thais were pinned down by the fire, the NVA infantry assaulted and virtually destroyed the volunteer battalions. Thai casualties were heavy and hundreds of Thais became prisoners of war.

But this disastrous experience on the Plaine Des Jarres did not diminish the Thai enthusiasm for sending volunteers to Laos. The Thai commitment continued until the cease-fire in 1973 and the volunteers engaged in a number of heavy actions in Military Region II in which the NVA employed its largest artillery and the Thais had to call on U.S. B-52's to avoid destruction.

The Thai soldier in the volunteer battalions was not the same type of man found in the regular Thai Army, and this was perhaps the greatest weakness exposed in the fighting. The volunteers, although many of them came from the regular army, were attracted to the volunteer force by the exceptionally good pay it offered. Many of these volunteers were drifters, unemployed and uneducated men from both sides of the Mekong who had received brief training and had no motivation other than money. Although the officers and NCOs provided by the Thai Army were mostly first rate, they were unable to raise the volunteer units to the standards of the regular army.

The Special Guerrilla Units

Just as the Thai commitment of volunteer battalions increased in size in Laos, so did the U.S. support of irregular units in Military Region II. This was a CIA project in which the role of the U.S. Army appeared to be negligible, although as recounted earlier, the project actually began during the brief White Star period under U.S. Army Special Forces. The six or seven infantry battalions of the National Lao Army under the command of Vang Pao in Sam Neua Province and on the Plaine Des Jarres were gradually converted to Special Guerilla Units and disappeared from the NLA force structure, although the NLA general staff insisted--and Vang Pao agreed--to keep two of the regular NLA battalions at skeleton strength. While most of the cadre and soldiers in Vang Pao's SGUs were simply transferred over from the regular units under his command, some of his recruits were Meo village chiefs and Meo civilians of all ages, from young boys to old men who volunteered to join the fight against the North Vietnamese.

At first when we in the National Lao Army staff learned that civilians were being recruited and given positions of responsibility such as squad leader, company and even battalion commander, we doubted that the SGUs would be effective in combat. But since we had no authority over the SGU--it was strictly an American project--we could not interfere. Later, during some of the heaviest fighting of the NVA dry season offensive of 1970 on the Plaine Des Jarres, these ex-civilian commanders performed remarkably well, at least as effectively as regular army officers.

As the intensity of the war increased, so did the casualties. Occasionally, when I had the opportunity to check troop lists of the SGUs, I found that boys of ten and twelve years old were being recruited to fill the depleted ranks. Upon investigating I discovered that most of these youngsters were replacing their fathers who had fallen in battle and that the boys felt that their proper roles were to assume their fathers' positions.

The Meo of Sam Neua and Xieng Khouang Provinces were not the only indigenous minority group to participate in the CIA's Special Guerilla Unit project. In Military Region I the Phou Noi were organized into SGUs to screen the China and North Vietnam frontiers and to assist in the protection of Luang Prabang. When the Royal Capital was surrounded by NVA and Pathet Lao units in 1970 and 1971, these Phou Noi units, reinforced with Lao irregulars from Savannakhet, defended Luang Prabang. I visited the forward areas at that time and was most favorably impressed by the effectiveness of these irregular battalions.

The SGUs of Military Region III were quite different from those of Regions I and II. Rather than being recruited from native tribes, most of the soldiers and cadres of the Region III SGUs were Lao and Thai of the Mekong valley of Savannakhet Province and adjacent Thailand. Only a few cadre and soldiers of the NLA transferred to the SGU; the recruits also came from the ranks of ex-soldiers who had been discharged from the army for disciplinary reasons, from unemployed local Chinese and Vietnamese, and from Thais who crossed the Mekong, lured by the promise of high pay in the SGU.

There was another interesting source of officers for the Region III SGUs. When Phoumi Nosaven fled to Thailand to escape arrest in 1965, many of his loyal officers went with him. Some of these officers were essentially apolitical but had the ill fortune to happen to be in units aligned with Phoumi Nosavan. The Thai government collected the officers and soldiers who landed in Thailand at that time and placed them in a camp near Udorn. In early 1965 Souvanna Phouma suggested to me that many of the Lao officers languishing in the camp in Thailand could still be of use to the country. He asked me to go over there and persuade them to return; he thought they would trust me because I had been able to work professionally with Phoumi as well as with Kouprasith and Souvanna Phouma.

I flew to Udorn and the Thais permitted me to meet with the Lao officers. Some of them were distrustful and refused to believe that they would be granted amnesty if they would return home. Nevertheless, after hours of discussion, some of it quite heated and abusive to me, I was able to persuade a few of them to return to Laos. On a second trip I was

able to recruit a few more and later several hundred officers, NCOs and soldiers returned home. Some of these people joined the SGU in Savannakhet and one of them even became a SGU battalion commander.

Region III SGUs were often called upon to reinforce in Region II. Whenever the NVA launched a big drive, Vang Pao would call for reinforcements and Region III invariably responded. The reverse seldom happened; that is, it was rare when any of Vang Pao's units were sent to fight outside of Military Region II.

Military Region III SGUs fought well in Vang Pao's area but they took heavy casualties. The SGUs of Region II and Region III complemented each other very well and fought courageously side-by-side. The young commanders, many of them transferred from the NLA, exhibited excellent leadership and some earned early promotions for their performance in combat.

Besides reinforcing in Region II, the principal mission of the SGUs in Region III was to operate along the Ho Chi Minh trail. This mission also involved them in heavy combat with the NVA and it was frequently necessary to call for B-52 support to rescue them.

The SGUs of Military Region IV were also mostly made up of Lao, many of them transferred from the NLA. Initially the cadre had been provided by the CIA from men recruited and trained in Thailand but later we replaced these Thai leaders with native Lao officers. From their bases on the Bolovens Plateau, the principal missions of the Region IV SGUs was to interdict the Ho Chi Minh trail. This, as in Region III, involved them in heavy combat with the NVA which, from 1970 on, exerted a great effort to destroy the SGUs and their bases on the Bolovens Plateau.

Although the NLA units and the SGUs often fought side-by-side, especially in Military Regions III and IV, and performed well in coordination with each other, the great disparity in pay between the soldiers of the two forces caused a serious morale problem in the NLA. A regular soldier's pay in the NLA was 900 kip per month and his commander received an allowance of 30 kip per day for each soldier in the unit. This allowance was to pay for the soldiers' rations and it

was barely enough to provide a very meager diet. On the other hand, the soldiers of the SGUs were paid 8,000 kip per month plus a 200 kip per day ration allowance while they were on operations. Of course they ate a lot better than the NLA soldiers in the adjacent foxholes.

The Laos government had practically no source of revenue of its own; its entire budget, including soldiers' pay, came from the American aid program. Deeply concerned about the poverty conditions under which our soldiers existed, we in the Army staff prevailed upon the American ambassador to permit an increase in this element of the budget. We pointed out not only the great differences in pay between the pay of a Lao Army soldier and the pay of the CIA financed SGU soldier, but the fact that a beginning female clerk typist earned eight times the pay of a soldier. By 1970 we were able to pay a private soldier about 3,000 kip per month. Naturally, civilian pay scales increased at the same time, as did prices, and the disparity between civilian and military pay remained about the same. One result of this disparity was that NLA soldiers had a strong incentive to leave the Army and join the SGUs.

Transfers from the NLA to the SGUs were encouraged by the NLA staff as well as by the CIA. The theory--or strategy-- at the time (from about 1970 to 1973) was that the NLA would secure the populated regions and the capital while the SGUs would strike the NVA logistic and infiltration systems on the Ho Chi Minh and Sihanouk trails and in Military Region II draw the NVA main forces into killing zones where they could be destroyed by U.S. airpower. This strategy called for a relatively small regular army and for an increase in the SGU force. In fact, by the time the agreement was reached with the Neo Lao Hak Sat on a cease-fire and new coalition government in 1973, the SGU force had grown to nearly the size of the NLA itself. We had about 58,000 troops in the NLA, while our best estimate of the SGU force (we were never told its exact size) was about 38,000.

The military region commanders had the authority to transfer officers and men from NLA units under their command to SGU units in their regions. At first we had no problem with this procedure because the region commanders

regularly reported these transfers to the Army staff which could strike the transferred personnel from the regular rosters. Later however, many soldiers were transferred and no reports of the fact were submitted to headquarters. Consequently, thousands of soldiers were drawing pay from two sources simultaneously; from the NLA as well as from the CIA. Furthermore, their erstwhile NLA commanders were still collecting their ration allowances. This became a problem of major proportions by 1972 and up until the cease-fire we never made much progress in solving it.

Despite the financial incentives, many NLA officers viewed the SGUs as a temporary phenomenon and chose to remain in the service of the NLA, believing that their long-term security rested in the NLA.

While the morale of the officers and men of the NLA suffered because of the pay differential, the irregulars in Vang Pao's SGUs also had a morale problem but this problem was more susceptible of solution than the one involving pay. Vang Pao's officers wanted to wear dress uniforms and insignia of rank when they were not on operations. Since they were not in the army, the regulations prohibited this. Nevertheless many of the Vang Pao irregulars came to Vientiane, had uniforms made and wore the NLA insignia of their rank in the SGUs. Realizing that this was a matter of serious importance to Vang Pao's officers, the Army staff did nothing to discourage this practice.

The Special Guerrilla Unit project, as it was operated in Laos by the United States through its CIA was probably unique in the history of warfare. Here was a large nation--the United States--hiring soldiers of a small nation--Laos--to fight primarily for the objectives of the large nation on the territory of the small nation against an invader--North Vietnam--and on behalf of another small nation--South Vietnam.

The manner in which the SGUs were directed and committed to operations was also probably unique to this situation and it in fact varied from region to region within Laos. Generally speaking the American staff, which numbered about 1,000 ex-military officers by 1973, planned and directed all SGU operations. In each military region they selected one Lao officer whom they trusted to be the overall commander of the SGUs in that region and passed the operations orders to him. In the event

the military region commander wanted to employ SGU on an operation not planned by the American staff, he could deal with the Lao regional SGU commander who would forward his request to the American staff or, if the operation he had in mind was of major proportions, he would make his request to NLA headquarters in Vientiane. The NLA staff would study the request and discuss it with the American CIA staff in Vientiane and a decision would be jointly determined.

In Military Regions II and IV, the military region commander was also the SGU commander. In Region II it was Vang Pao. In Region IV, Brigadier General Souchay Vongsavanh had earned the confidence of the Americans in the SGU operation while he was chief of staff of the region. Later when he was appointed Region IV commander he retained responsibility for the SGUs.

The commander of Military Region I at Luang Prabang was Brigadier General Prince Sayavong, a brother of the king, but all SGU operations were handled by his deputy, Brigadier General Tiao Vannaseng, who was also a member of the royal family.

There were no SGU's in Military Region V, the Vientiane region, since security in this area was the responsibility of the regular army.

In Military Region III the situation was different still. The Military Region Commander, Brigadier General Noupheet had no interest in SGU operations and the Americans dealt directly with the Special Guerrilla Units in the region.

The SGU project reached the peak of its effectiveness shortly before the cease-fire agreement was reached in 1973 and it was high on the Pathet Lao list for rapid dissolution after that time. Because it was essentially a foreign army, the Lao government had no grounds on which to argue for SGU survival and furthermore, the Americans would no longer pay for it. Its difficult demise is told in the next chapter.

Escalation and a Change in Strategy

The level of combat began to increase remarkably in 1968. The North Vietnamese were feeling the punishment of American bombing and one of the objectives of their 1968 dry season offensive was to eliminate the U.S. Air Force's control facilities in Sam Neua that supported the bombing campaign. Using regulars of its 316th Division and other NVA units, the NVA overran Nam Bac north of Luang Prabang and in February seized the USAF site at Phou Pha Thi, killing all but one of the Americans.

With heavy American air support, Vang Pao launched a vigorous counteroffensive in northeast Xieng Khouang and Samneua in November 1968. By April 1969 Vang Pao had reoccupied Xieng Khouang town and in September that year also retook Muong Soui on the edge of the Plaine des Jarres. His attempt to retake Phou Pha Thi failed however, and he was forced to withdraw from Sam Neua by heavy NVA pressure. The NVA 316th Division dug in to stay in Sam Neua.

In early 1970, the NVA began a new offensive, this time using another of its best divisions, the 312th, and succeeded in retaking Xieng Khouang as well as Muong Soui. For a time it appeared that the offensive on the Plaine des Jarres might carry all the way west to interdict Route 13 between Vientiane and Luang Prabang. Only the commitment of the best NVA units from Regions III and IV, as well as irregulars from those regions, reinforcing Vang Pao's Region II irregulars--and heavy American air support reinforcing the Lao Air Force--managed to stop the drive at Long Cheng and Sam Thong. But in these battles, some of the best units of the NVA were virtually destroyed.

Similar heavy action was taking place in the south. The Cambodian *coup* of March 1970 had forced the NVA to place even greater reliance on the Ho Chi Minh and Sihanouk trails. This called for an offensive to expand and secure the network of roads and waterways in Laos' Military Regions III and IV. Consequently, employing their 968th Division and other NVA regulars, the North Vietnamese seized Attopeu in April 1970