

Indochina Monographs

**RLG Military Operations and Activities
in the Laotian Panhandle**

by

Brig. Gen. Soutchay Vongsavanh



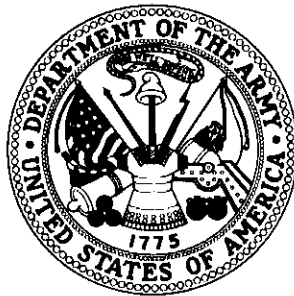
U.S. ARMY CENTER OF MILITARY HISTORY
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Indochina Monographs

This is one of a series published by the U.S. Army Center of Military History. They were written by officers who held responsible positions in the Cambodian, Laotian, and South Vietnamese armed forces during the war in Indochina. The General Research Corporation provided writing facilities and other necessary support under an Army contract with the Center of Military History. The monographs were not edited or altered and reflect the views of their authors--not necessarily those of the U.S. Army or the Department of Defense. The authors were not attempting to write definitive accounts but to set down how they saw the war in Southeast Asia.

Colonel William E. Le Gro, U.S. Army, retired, has written a forthcoming work allied with this series, Vietnam: From Cease-Fire to Capitulation. Another book, The Final Collapse by General Cao Van Vien, the last chairman of the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff, will be formally published and sold by the Superintendent of Documents.

Taken together these works should provide useful source materials for serious historians pending publication of the more definitive series, the U.S. Army in Vietnam.

JAMES L. COLLINS, JR.
Brigadier General, USA
Chief of Military History

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Preface

The Kingdom of Laos, because of geographical location, was destined to play a major role as North Vietnam endeavored to expand her area of influence throughout Indochina. This is especially true of the Laotian Panhandle which borders both South Vietnam and Cambodia. Following the March 1970 coup in Cambodia, the closure of the port of Sihanoukville to the Communists and the increasing effectiveness of navy Market Time barrier operations, southern Laos became even more important to the enemy for the movement of supplies and men to support Communist activities in South Vietnam and Cambodia.

This monograph reviews and analyzes Royal Lao Government military operations and activities in the Laotian Panhandle. I have devoted special attention to the significance of the panhandle for enemy military operations in South Vietnam and Cambodia, the initiation of conventional warfare in southern Laos, lessons learned during the employment of regular and irregular forces and developments following the 1973 cease-fire. As author, I am fortunate to be able to draw on my personal experience as Commanding General of Military Region 4 from 1 July 1971 until my exodus 13 June 1975.

I am indebted to General Oudone Sananikone, former Chief of Staff for the Royal Lao Armed Forces and subsequently Under Secretary, Ministry of National Defense, for his guidance, assistance and comprehensive knowledge of developments in Laos. I am especially grateful for his review and critique of my final draft with the objective of providing a highly professional contribution to the Indochina Refugee-Authorized Monograph Program.

Finally, I wish to express my personal appreciation to Ms. Pham Thi Bong. Ms. Bong, a former Captain in the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces, devoted long hours typing, editing and in the administrative preparation of my manuscript in final form.

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McLean, Virginia
21 February 1978

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CHAPTER I

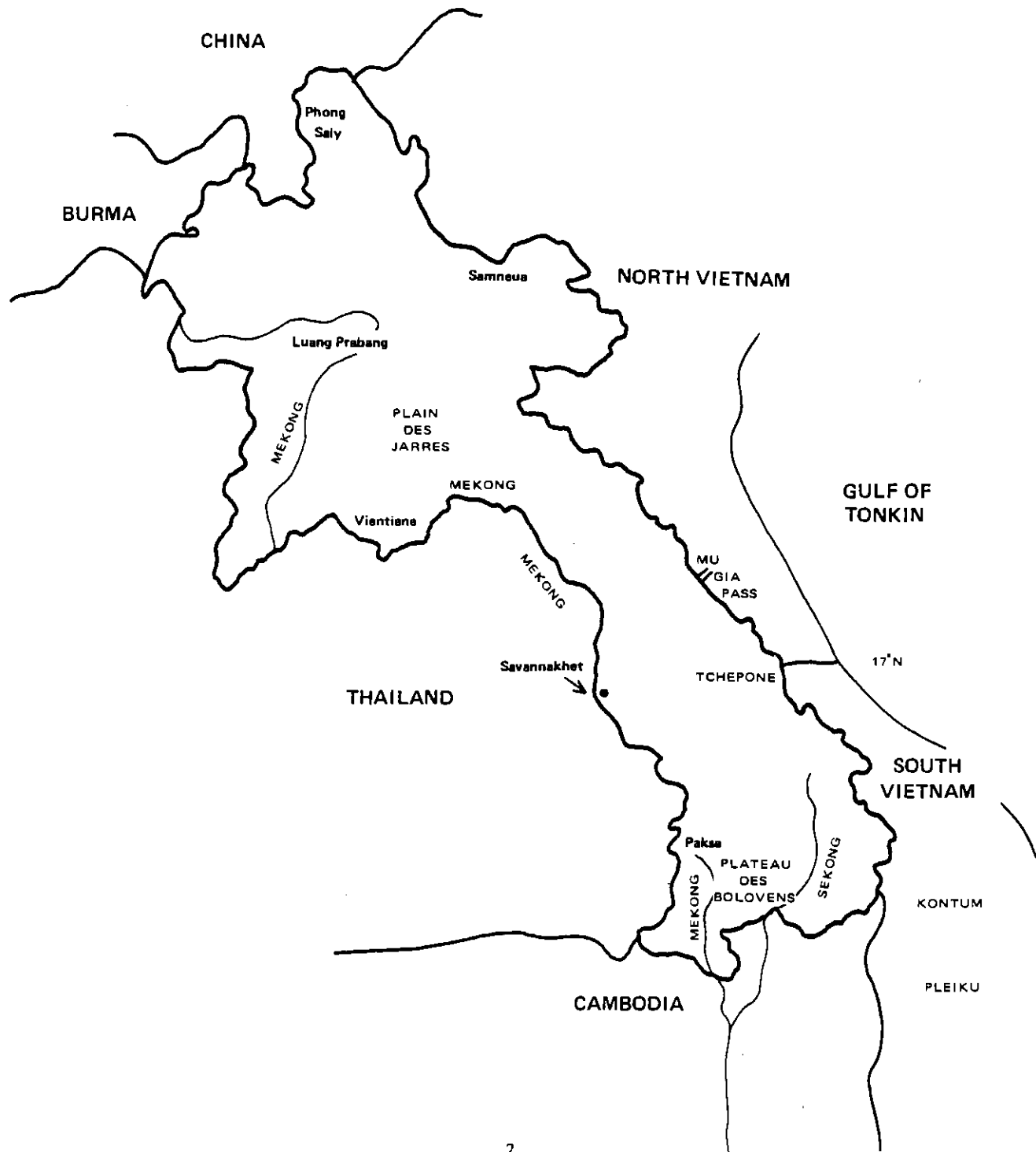
Introduction

In the years following World War II and the demise of the French colonial empire in Indochina, Laos bore a tragic resemblance to the small state of Belgium, which like Laos, was an unwilling but helpless battleground of its larger, more powerful neighbors. No external power coveted Laos for its wealth — it was surely the most undeveloped, poorest state in the region — or actively sought its support in a larger alliance. But it occupied, by the arbitrary politics of its boundaries and its geographical situation, a position that impelled the North Vietnamese to occupy and use its territory in the furtherance of the conquest of South Vietnam. (Map 1) The part of Laos essential to North Vietnam's logistical support of the war in South Vietnam was the panhandle. This monograph seeks to explain why this was so and to describe from the Laotian point of view the significant events of the conflict in Indochina which occurred in the panhandle of Laos.

The Laos Panhandle

When we speak of the Laos panhandle, we are referring to that part of the country that extends south from about the 18th parallel and forms the corridor between Thailand's Korat Plateau and the narrow waist of Vietnam. Not only is the nation of Laos shaped like a key, but the shaft of the key — the panhandle — became the key to North Vietnam's successful prosecution of the war against the South.

Map 1 - The Key Position of Laos in Indochina



The Annamite chain runs along the entire eastern side of Laos. The chain extends northeast to southeast, paralleling the direction of flow of the Mekong River. In its upper portion, the mountains resemble those in northern Laos, having rugged peaks and deep valleys. The peaks are from approximately 5,000 to 8,000 feet in elevation and this portion of the chain presents a formidable barrier to movement between Laos and North Vietnam. In central-east Khammouane Province, the elevations are somewhat lower and passes allow easier crossing. Farther south, at about the latitude of the city of Khammouane, the chain enters a limestone region characterized by steep ridges and peaks, sink holes, and disappearing streams. Then, on a line roughly parallel with the Demilitarized Zone between North and South Vietnam, a comparatively flat area occurs and travel is relatively easy through this area. From this point to the southern end of Laos the chain again becomes very rugged and its elevations rise to 6,000 feet; the highest point is over 7,000 feet.

At the neck of the panhandle section the Annamite chain extends to the Mekong River. Below this section, mountains are buttressed on the west by several plateaus, the best known being the Camnon Plateau in Khammouane Province. From the rolling plain on the plateau, the land slopes gently westward to the alluvial plains along the Mekong River. Prominent in the southern part of the country is the fertile Bolovens Plateau. Almost encircled by a high escarpment, the plateau has an elevation of about 4,000 feet. Its terrain is also generally rolling and there are large patches of grassland.

Aside from the ruggedness of the terrain in the panhandle, the weather was the other significant factor which influenced military activity there. The midsummer rains that swept across Indochina, carried by the southwest monsoon, drenched the land with some of the heaviest rainfalls recorded anywhere in the world. The consequence was that all activity slowed during the summer months as the North Vietnamese reduced the traffic on the Ho Chi Minh trail and pulled their forces and temporary installations eastward toward the South

Vietnam border. As fall approached with the annual dry season, they again pushed westward in the panhandle and resumed the flow of traffic on the trails and roads of southern Laos.

The Ho Chi Minh Trail

Infiltration of Communist cadre from North to South Vietnam started in 1959 when the North Vietnamese decided to support and strengthen the guerrilla war in the South. They crossed the 17th parallel by two main routes: down the South China Sea in fishing boats, junks, and freighters; or through the mountainous jungles of the panhandle of Laos on foot, elephants, and bicycles. They used old paths through the mountains, the former colonial routes, and trails in the jungle that had been constructed during the Indochina war. This system of roads, trails and waterways became known as the Ho Chi Minh trail. In the beginning, the Ho Chi Minh trail served merely as a line of communication for Communist couriers and small combat units but they began making fuller use of it by 1962.

The trail runs through tropical, dense forests. The land is rugged and harsh even for the montagnards who inhabit it and exist under conditions that have not changed much since the stone age. The jungles along these trails are almost impenetrable primeval forests; the mountains are steep and rocky. During the French colonial regime, as well as after Laos independence, this part of the country was so remote, isolated and undeveloped that no effort was made to control it. But it was ideally suited for guerrilla warfare.

The distance from the Red River Delta in North Vietnam to the populous rice lands of the Mekong Delta in South Vietnam was shorter by way of Laos than by the road along the coast, even if use of the latter had been available to the Communists after the 1954 partition.

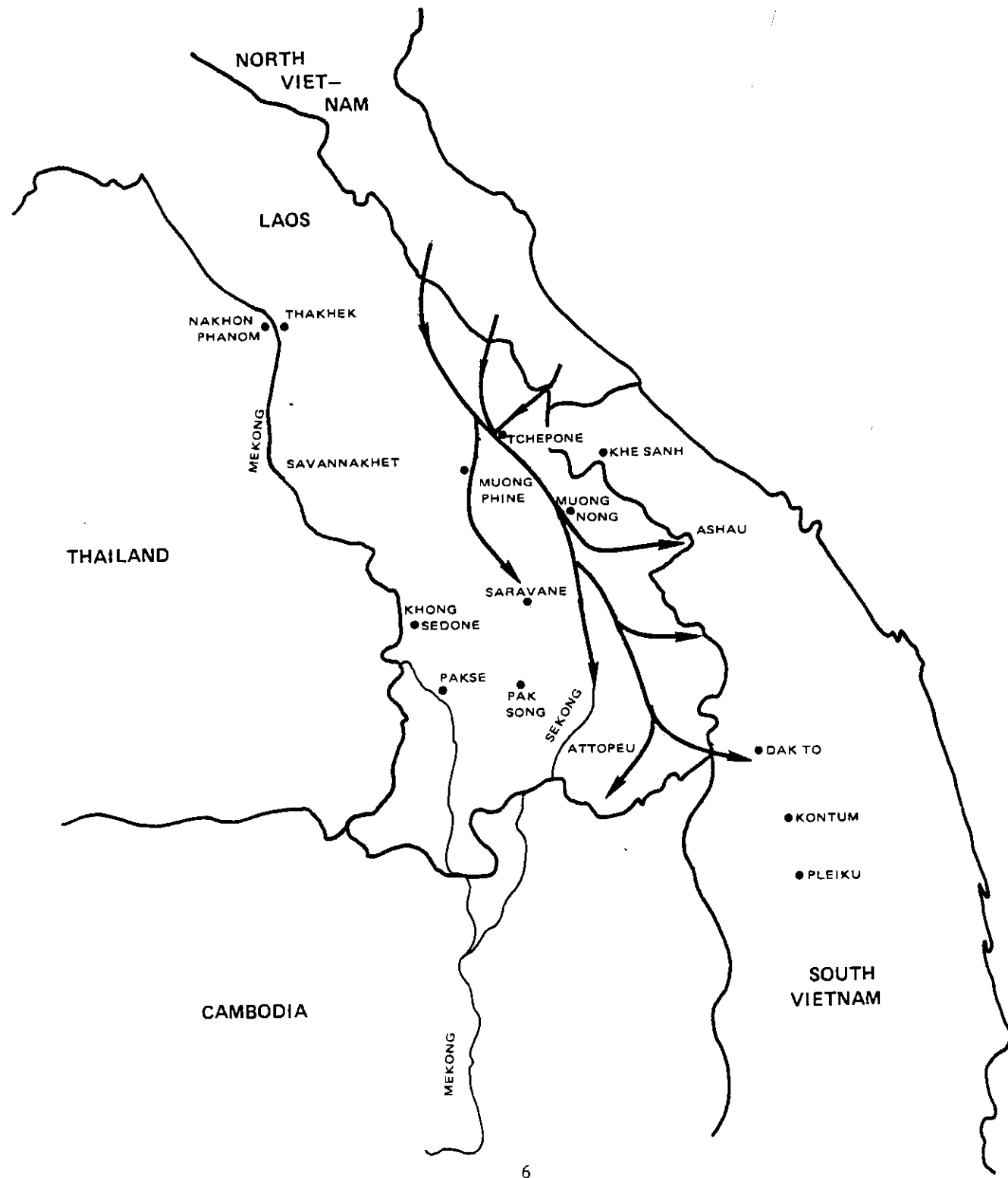
The passes across the Annamite Mountains between Vietnam and Laos are at relatively low elevations but approaches to these passes are through a wide strip of rugged terrain deeply cut by torrents and forested with thick jungle. Roads had to be engineered under most difficult conditions.

In the north sector, the North Vietnamese were able to use old roads through the Keo Neua and Mu Gia passes which had been improved during 1961 and 1962 under their aid agreements with Prince Souvanaphouma. In the southern sector, however, which ran through the area with the heaviest annual rainfall in Laos, new roads had to be built. (Map 2)

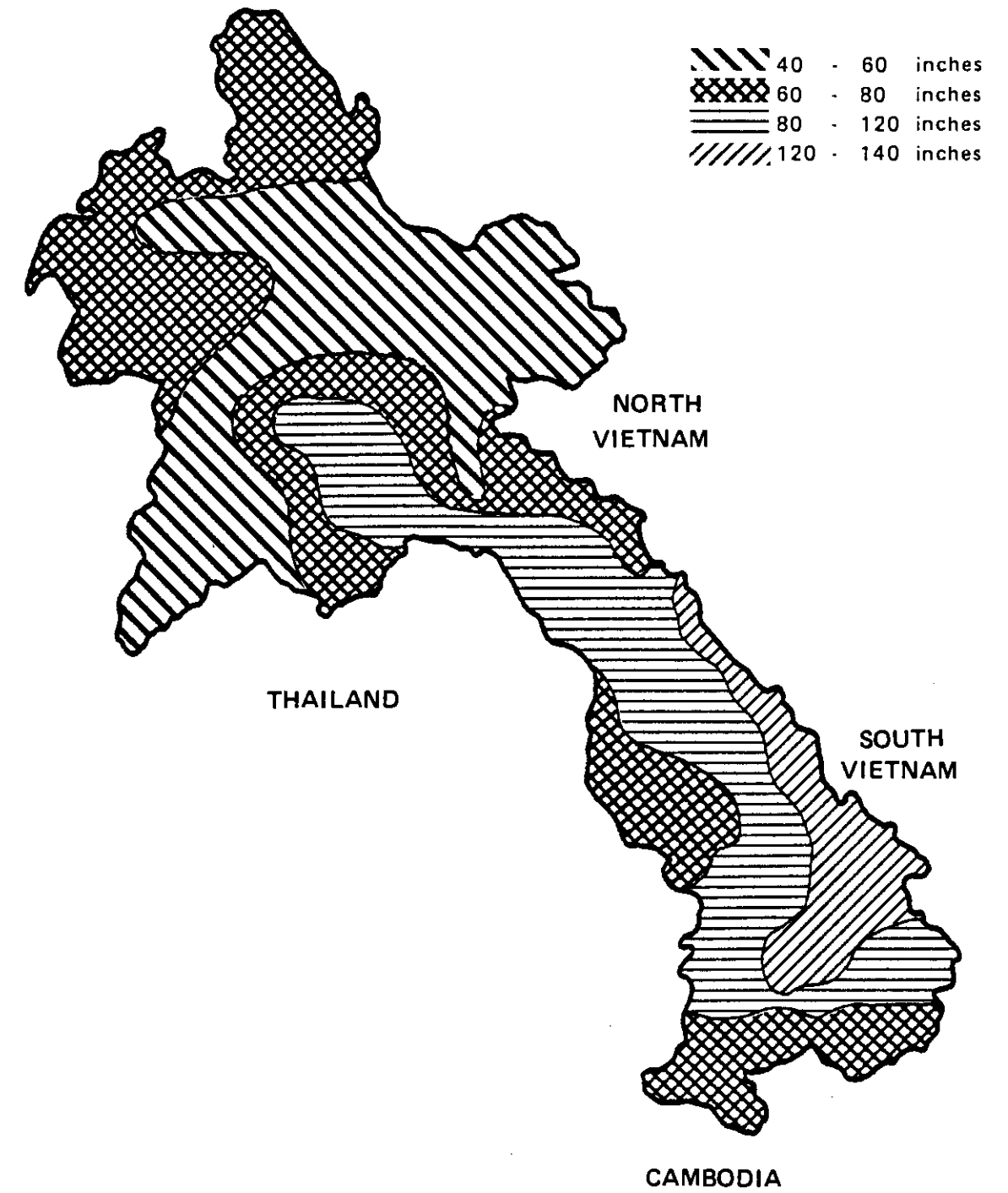
This trail continues into the southern portion of South Vietnam and although it was referred to in the singular, it actually comprised a whole network of paths which could be used or abandoned as attempts at interdiction dictated. Many portions of the trail passed under thick tall trees, making it difficult or impossible to see from the air. In some sections waterways, such as the Sekong river that runs from A Shau through Banbac and Attopeu east of Bolovens Plateau, form part of the network. Activity along the trail varied with the seasons; traffic was heaviest during the dry season, October to May, and was lightest during the rainy season. (Map 3) The NVA moved materiel down the trail by stages and it was concealed in depot storage, rest and repair areas all along the way. Most transportation was by truck convoys but bicycles and foot portage were employed when the need arose. Damaged sections of the trail were repaired rapidly and efficiently. (Map 4)

During the French domination of Indochina a French commission studied the feasibility of building a railroad from Dong Ha, Vietnam, to Savannakhet, Laos with Vietnam through Mu Gia pass because of the exportable tin that was close to Thakhek. Although this link was never completed, pylons for an aerial tramway were erected through the Mu Gia pass to bring construction supplies into the interior.

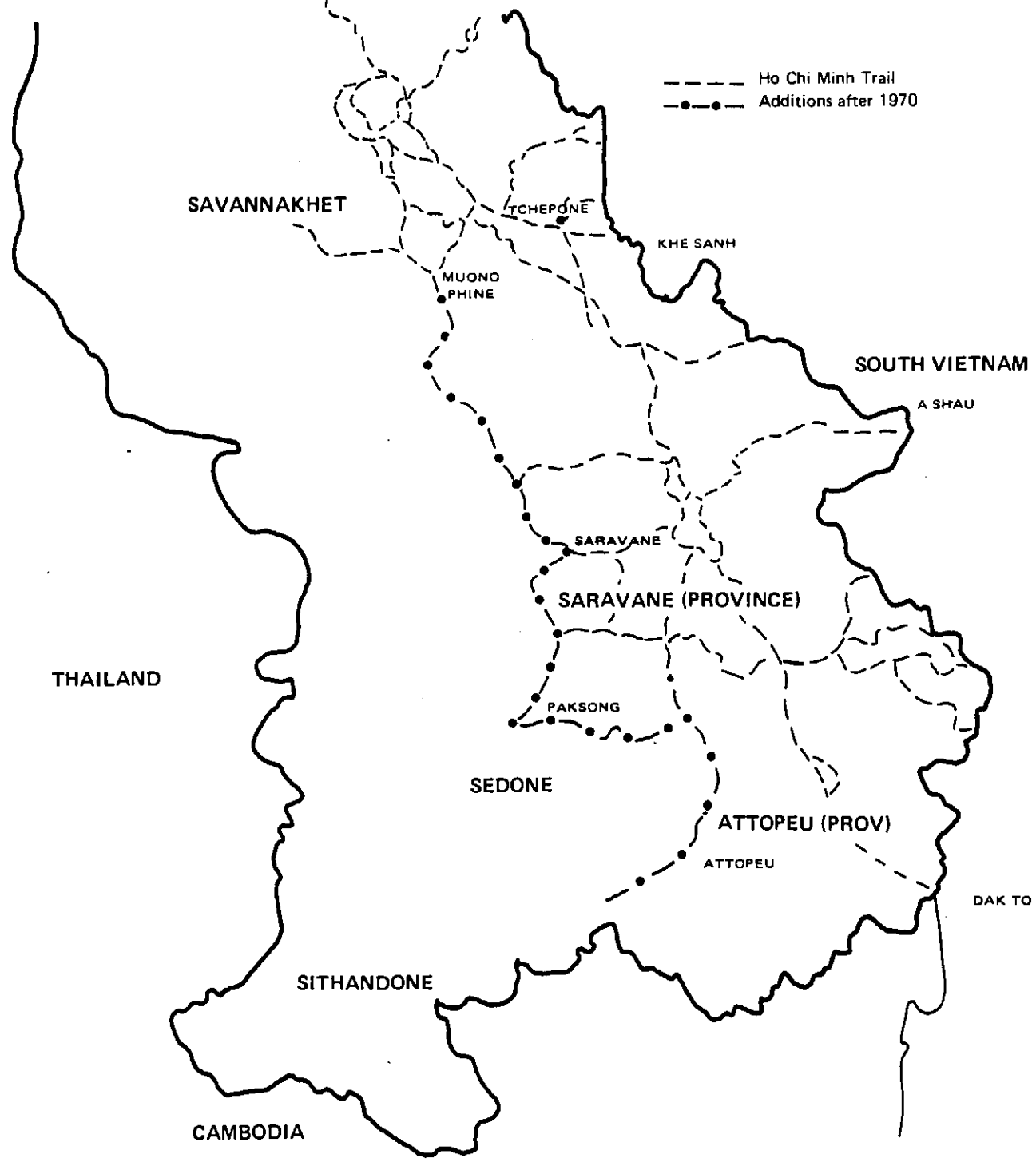
Map 2 - Ho Chi Minh Trail



Map 3 - Annual Rainfall In Laos



Map 4 - The Ho Chi Minh Trail After 1970



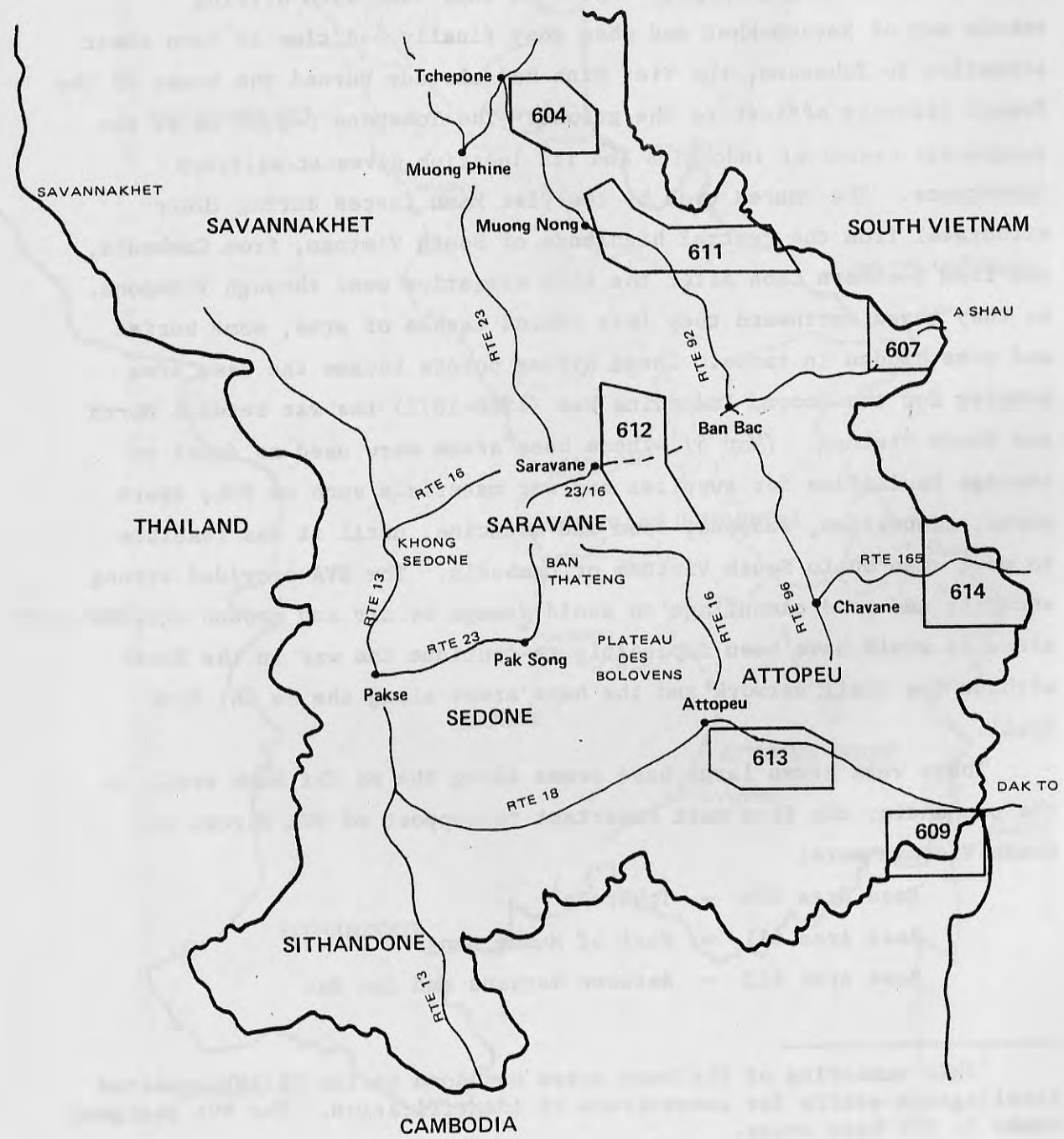
The governor-general of Indochina also spoke fondly of extending the motorable road existing then from Savannakhet to Muong Phine, near Tchepone, with Dong Ha, but budgetary constraints made such an enterprise impossible at that time. Following the March 9, 1945 *Coup*, the Viet Minh clamped their hold on the Tchepone region and its people. The French were preoccupied at this time with driving rebels out of Savannakhet and when they finally had time to turn their attention to Tchepone, the Viet Minh had already burned the house of the French district officer to the ground. The Tchepone region is at the geographic center of Indochina and its location gives it military importance. The routes used by the Viet Minh forces during their withdrawal from the central highlands of South Vietnam, from Cambodia, and from Southern Laos after the 1954 armistice went through Tchepone. As they moved northward they left behind caches of arms, some buried and some hidden in caves. These hiding points became the base area complex for the Second Indochina War (1956-1975) the war between North and South Vietnam. (Map 5) These base areas were used as depot or storage facilities for supplies and war materials such as POL, spare parts, ammunition, weapons, food and medicine, until it was feasible to move them on to South Vietnam or Cambodia. The NVA provided strong security and good camouflage to avoid damage by air and ground attacks since it would have been impossible to continue the war in the South without the trail network and the base areas along the Ho Chi Minh trail.

There were seven large base areas along the Ho Chi Minh trail in the panhandle; the five most important to support of NVA forces in South Vietnam were:

- Base Area 604 - Tchepone¹
- Base Area 611 - East of Muong Nong
- Base Area 612 - Between Sarvane and Ban Bac

¹This numbering of the base areas was done by the US/SVN combined intelligence staffs for convenience of identification. The NVA assigned names to the base areas.

Map 5 — The Enemy Base Area Complex in Eastern Mr III and Mr IV



Heavily Camouflaged NVA Storage Bunker on the Ho Chi Minh Trail near Tchepone in the Laos panhandle

Base Area 614 - East of Chavane

Base Area 609 - Eastern Attopeu Province in the tri-border area of Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos

Base Area 604 was the main logistic base during the Vietnam War; from here the coordination and distribution of supplies into RVN Military Region 1 and to the base areas further to the south were accomplished.

Base Area 611 facilitated the transportation of supplies from Base Area 604 south to 609. Base Area 611 had fuel storage sites and fuel pipelines to supply Base Area 609 and the supply convoys moving in both directions. It also fed fuel and supplies to Base Area 607 and on into South Vietnam's A Shau Valley.

Base Area 612 was just as important as 604 and 611. It was used for logistic support of the enemy B-3 Front in the Vietnam central highlands.

Base Area 614 between Chavane, Laos, and Kham Duc, Vietnam was used primarily to transport war materials to South Vietnam's lowlands in RVN Military Region 2 and to the enemy B-3 Front.

Base Area 609 was important because of the fine road conditions that made it possible to move supplies to the B-3 Front when weather was bad and during the rainy season. Furthermore, the POL pipeline system completed in 1974 passed through this base area into South Vietnam.

Base Area 613, near Attopeu, primarily supported NVA forces in southern Laos and Cambodia.

The NVA logistical units, the Binh Trams, were under the control of the 559th Transportation Group.² Most main Binh Trams were composed of engineer, transportation, medical, anti-aircraft and infantry units. The Binh Trams provided gasoline for the convoys and food for the troops infiltrating into South Vietnam.

There were no Pathet Lao units authorized to operate along the infiltration corridor, and the local tribes were excluded from the area.

The North Vietnamese ran the Ho Chi Minh trail as if it were

²Freely translated "Binh Tram" meant "Commo-Liaison Site."



North Vietnamese Petroleum Pipe Line in the Laos Panhandle
The installation was under air attack at the time this photo was taken
(probably in 1972)

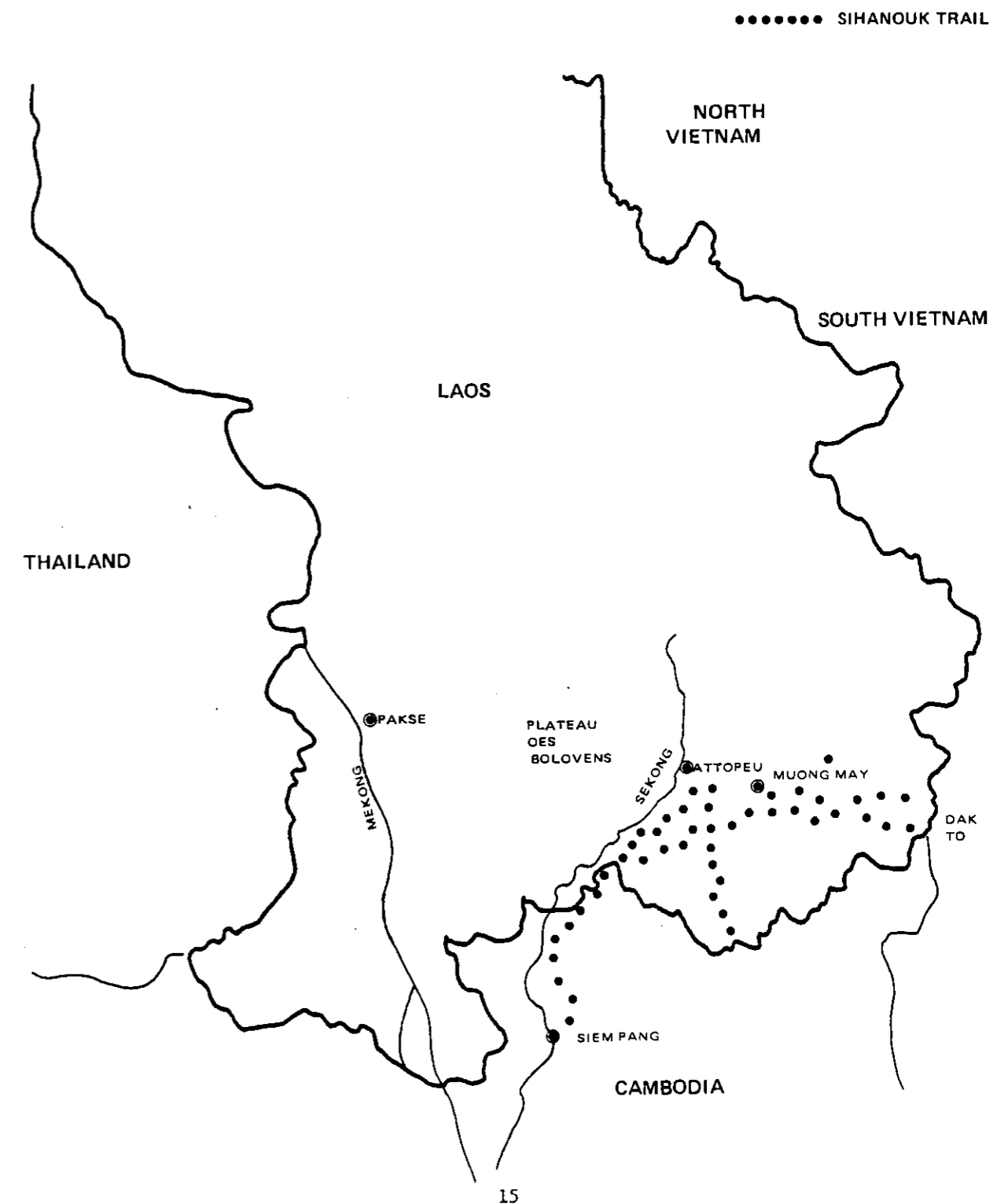
a strategic rear area of South Vietnam. NVA engineer units maintained the existing roads and built new ones. They also built the storage areas along the trail. Vietnamese labor battalions, including women, kept roads, paths, and storage areas in good repair. Vietnamese medical personnel maintained infirmaries along the routes to treat infiltrators and locally assigned Vietnamese. To provide some distraction from the arduous life of the Vietnamese stationed along the trail, entertainment troupes passed through from time to time with presentations of patriotic plays and songs.

The Vietnamese infiltrators were trucked through North Vietnam late at night and continued their difficult journey on foot once they had reached Laos. They marched day and night along well camouflaged trails. The infiltration groups ranged from small squads of specialists to units of five hundred troops. The large groups were fresh replacements destined to replace losses in units fighting in South Vietnam and to form new combat and logistical units there. The Binh Trams provided guides to lead them south.

The Sihanouk Trail

The Sihanouk trail was an extension of the Ho Chi Minh trail and branched off southeast of the Bolovens Plateau, south of Attopeu and Muong May. (Map 6) At the time the NVA started building the Sihanouk trail in 1965 in Attopeu Province, nobody knew, not even Colonel Khong Vongnarath who was commander of Attopeu Province, that the explosions of dynamite day and night were from the NVA construction near by and Colonel Khong was not inclined to investigate. NVA security was strong and Khong had a tacit understanding with the NVA to the effect that his patrols would not range far from the limits of Attopeu Town and NVA forces would not shell or otherwise interfere with his garrison. From time to time Colonel Khong would send soldiers disguised as elephant hunters into the NVA-controlled area around Attopeu and they would return with reports of NVA strength and activity, but no regular patrols were dispatched nor was any aggressive action

Map 6 - Sihanouk Trail



taken against the NVA. The danger of NVA retaliation was too great as was the potential loss of some lucrative commercial enterprises.

As the fighting in South Vietnam grew more intense the trail became a major military issue, perhaps a key issue in determining the outcome of the war. The flow of troops, weapons, and ammunition from north to south through Laos was constantly on the increase. Prince Sihanouk had allowed the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese to occupy the northeastern part of Cambodia. In a press conference in Peking, after he had been deposed by his Defense Minister, General Lon Nol, Sihanouk complained:

"We had no neutrality. Now we are a colony of the Americans and are occupied by 65,000 South Vietnamese troops, mercenaries of Americans. I was deposed on March 18, 1970, because it was said that I allowed {Viet Cong and Viet Minh to occupy Cambodia}. They sometimes did come to Cambodia because of some necessity, some strategic or tactical necessity. But this was within the framework of their fight against the United States, to liberate their homeland."

"Even if they were in Cambodia, they looked toward Saigon. All their efforts were directed toward Saigon and South Vietnam, they wanted to liberate South Vietnam, they never looked in our direction. They recognized *de jure* our frontiers; even in the future, after their victory, they cannot change the frontiers of Cambodia."

The NVA opened the Sihanouk trail in May 1966 and from that time on supplies began flowing into northern Cambodia. The NVA also used motor boats for shipping down the Sekong River to the Cambodia border. Laotian soldiers at the observation posts on the high ground along the rim of the Bolovens Plateau could hear the noise of the boats along the Sekong and the trucks on the Sihanouk trail could be heard from the Attopeu garrison. The NVA also used the Sekong to float bags of rice covered with plastic to Cambodia day and night. Trucks generally did not move at all when U.S. or RLA aircraft were active

and when they did move, they were always camouflaged with branches tied to frames covering the body of the truck. The drivers were experts at seeking cover during air raids or while observation or reconnaissance planes were overhead. They would hide under rock overhangs or in thickets. Since bridges became targets, underwater ramps were constructed of logs and stones, and for crossing wide rivers, bamboo rafts were kept moored to the banks, hidden by the overhanging trees. In some places stream beds were used for roadways to avoid telltale tracks. By 1970, all sections of the trail were protected by anti-aircraft guns, some with radar.

To protect the trail as it passed Attopeu, the NVA periodically harassed the RLG garrison there, firing mortars into the city and attacking forward positions. This was sufficient to discourage the Laos command from attempting any serious interference with NVA activity on the Sihanouk trail.

The Pathet Lao

As time passed, the North Vietnamese proved repeatedly that they possessed the military power to control the panhandle of Laos to the extent necessary to operate their extensive logistical and replacement system, but this capability was enhanced by their exploitation of the indigenous Communist movement in Laos.

The term Pathet Lao was first used in 1949 by those Lao forces that followed the Viet Minh lead and refused to accept accommodations with the French to which other Lao nationalists had acceded the previous year. The term gained international recognition when it was used at the Geneva Conference of 1954, although representatives of the PL forces were not seated at the conference and it was a Viet Minh general who signed the cease-fire with the French on their behalf. The name remained in common use as a generic term for the Lao Communists despite the fact that a legal political party, the Neo Lao Hak Sat (NLHS), the Lao Patriotic Front, was formed in early 1956. Therefore, although Pathet Lao was properly the name only for the

armed forces of the Lao Communists between 1950 and 1965, it was used colloquially and included all non-Vietnamese components of the Laos Communist movement and has continued in use to this day. Other names used were Phak Pasason Lao (PPL) the People's Party of Laos, a semi-secret Communist Party organization; the Lao People's Liberation Army (LPLA), the Kong Thap Potpoy Pasason Lao, which were the armed forces under the command of the NLHS Central Committee; and the Dissident Neutralists (or Patriotic Neutralist Forces).

From about 1965 until the cease-fire there were six Pathet Lao battalions in Military Region IV, the southern end of the panhandle. Each of the provinces of Saravane, Attapeu, Champassak, Sithandone, Sedone, and Vapikham Thong had one battalion. The strength of a battalion varied from 150 to 300 men but frequently they existed at only cadre-strength and were dispersed in small units.

The Pathet Lao units lived with the population in the villages and they wore civilian clothes most of the time. Their mission was to ambush the supply lines of the Royal Laos Army (RLA) and conduct light harassing attacks against the RLA positions. Dispersed in small units, they had to assemble for operations. The PL cadres levied rice, pork, and chicken in the local areas for the NVA. They also recruited young men and sent them to northern Laos for training as soldiers and to be equipped with new weapons such as the AK-47 automatic rifle, submachine guns, 60-mm and 82-mm mortars. The PL units had modern weapons as good as those used by the NVA, but despite this modern armament, the PL were ineffective against RLC forces in the panhandle and required the constant support and guidance of the North Vietnamese.

Relations Between the Pathet Lao and the NVA

When the Vietnamese under Ho Chi Minh launched their anti-French independence movement, it was natural that they should have the support of certain Lao who had particularly close ties to the Vietnamese.

Future Lao Communist leaders Kaysone Phoumvihan and Nouhak Phomsavan, for example, and even some members of the Lao upper classes, including Prince Souphanouvong, Phoumi Vongvichit, and Singkapo Chounramany were ready to accept Vietnamese leadership in the making of their own revolution. The Vietnamese influenced the Lao revolutionaries, or perhaps one should say that the Lao revolutionaries willingly cooperated with and even subordinated themselves to the Vietnamese Communists. A widely accepted thesis holds that most Laotians dislike the Vietnamese but anti-Vietnamese feelings did not appear to be intense, although members of the Lao elite feared what they perceived as Vietnamese aggressiveness and organizational skill and, often betraying a sense of their own inferiority, they saw unfortunate implications for Laos in too close an association with the Vietnamese. The feeling of inadequacy *vis-a-vis* the Vietnamese was particularly evident among the educated Lao who had once been placed in positions subordinate to the Vietnamese by French colonial officers whose administrative policies tended to discriminate against the Lao.

Prince Souphanouvong visited Viet Minh headquarters in North Vietnam in 1949 and he was warmly welcomed by Ho Chi Minh. When the Viet Minh were reconstituted as the Lao Dong Party (Vietnamese Workers' Party), Prince Souphanouvong attended the first Party congress in February 1951, as did a number of other Lao and Cambodian observers.

The congress produced a platform containing the following significant clauses:

The people of Vietnam must unite closely with the people of Laos and Cambodia and give them every assistance in the common struggle against imperialist aggression, for the complete liberation in Indochina and the defense of world peace.

In the common interest of the three peoples, the people of Vietnam are willing to enter into long term cooperation with the peoples of Laos and Cambodia, with a view to bringing about an independent, strong and prosperous federation of the states of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia if the three peoples so desire.

After Laos gained independence at the Geneva conference in 1954 it soon became evident that the Pathet Lao had no intention of limiting their struggle for power to mere participation in Vientiane politics; to competing with other political groups within the framework of the existing political system. While engaging in cautious negotiations with the RLG they sought to consolidate their control over the two provinces of Samneua and Phong Saly, which had been designated by the conference as regroupment zones for their military forces prior to integration into the National Army. At the same time, the Pathet Lao began to build their own political and administrative institutions in the two northern provinces so as to have a permanent base for future advances into other areas. In the panhandle, however, the Pathet Lao went underground, just as the Viet Cong did in South Vietnam after the 1954 agreement.

*Significant Developments
Following the 1962 Geneva Agreement*

The Second Indochina War started after the French were defeated in the battle in Dien Bien Phu in North Vietnam in 1954 and the Geneva agreements failed to achieve a solution to the Vietnam problem. The objective of North Vietnam in the Second Indochina War was to take over South Vietnam and control all of Indochina, including Laos and Cambodia, and the 1962 Geneva Accords had no deterrent effect on North Vietnam's determination to accomplish this objective. This monograph attempts to explain how and why the panhandle of Laos became a battleground in North Vietnam's conquest of South Vietnam and Cambodia, even though the world paid little attention to the forgotten war in Laos.

In my opinion, there were six significant events following the 1962 accords that more than others influenced the course of the war in the panhandle of Laos. First among these, chronologically, was the departure of United States military advisers who had contributed so much to the modernization of the RLA. They were replaced at headquarters levels by a few American civilians, but the vital work the American Army officers and noncommissioned officers were doing in the field was no longer done.

Second, motivated by a number of related factors, the North Vietnamese vastly increased their commitment of regular forces in Laos, particularly in the panhandle, totally ignoring the prohibitions contained in the 1962 accords. These reinforcements, in combat as well as logistical units, constructed, operated, and protected the complex logistical system through southern Laos that the NVA required to support its heavy and growing expeditionary force in South Vietnam. US and South Vietnamese air and naval operations along the coast of South Vietnam gradually became more effective in intercepting North Vietnamese seaborne contraband traffic into the South, forcing even greater reliance on the land line of communications through Laos.

The third major event was the Cambodian change of government in 1970 which shifted that nation's policy from one of accommodation toward the Communists to one of reliance on US tactical and logistical support. This event closed the Cambodian ports to North Vietnamese supply ships that were moving great quantities of military materiel through Cambodia to the NVA and Viet Cong forces in the southern battlefields of South Vietnam. The closure of the ports meant that nearly all logistical support of the NVA in South Vietnam had to come through Laos, again increasing the importance of the Ho Chi Minh and Sihanouk trail systems and making it imperative that the flow not be interrupted. Not only was the system through southern Laos essential to logistical support of the NVA in South Vietnam, but virtually all replacements and new units made the march from North Vietnam to South Vietnam through the Laos panhandle. The great NVA offensives of 1968, 1969, and 1972, with their unprecedented casualties, required a steady flow of fresh replacements who could only reach the battlefields through the Laos panhandle.

A fourth event which impelled the NVA to take even more vigorous actions to protect the trail system through south Laos was the South Vietnamese raid-in-force into the heart of the Ho Chi Minh trail system at Tchepone in early 1971. This operation, Lam Son 719, contributed to South Vietnamese and Cambodian objectives, but certainly made it clear to the NVA that the system was vulnerable and had to be secured at all costs. The NVA continued to expand the system westward onto the Plateau de Bolovens, nearly to the Mekong River itself.

The 1973 Paris agreement to end the war in South Vietnam, and the similar agreement signed the following month pertaining to Laos were collectively the fifth event which significantly altered the course of the war in the panhandle. These agreements withdrew all US combat support from the RLA and meant also that the US would no longer interdict the Ho Chi Minh trail in southern Laos. The NVA then had free, uninhibited use of the system in the panhandle. The RLA and the Laos irregulars withdrew from all forward bases and no longer even offered token harrassment to the NVA. Furthermore, the new neutralist government of Laos reduced its armed forces to less than one fourth its former size, while the Pathet Lao, backed up by the NVA, grew ever stronger.

By the time of the final significant event, the collapse of South Vietnam on 30 April 1975, the Communists were in position to exploit the weakness of the loyal government forces. This was the final chapter, written as the Pathet Lao, in May 1975, streamed into the national and provincial capitals and forcefully asserted its supremacy. The people of Laos had lost their quest for neutrality, and their country had become a vassal state of their strong, red neighbors, the North Vietnamese.

CHAPTER II

The Organization and Employment of Irregular Forces in Southern Laos

The Military Regions

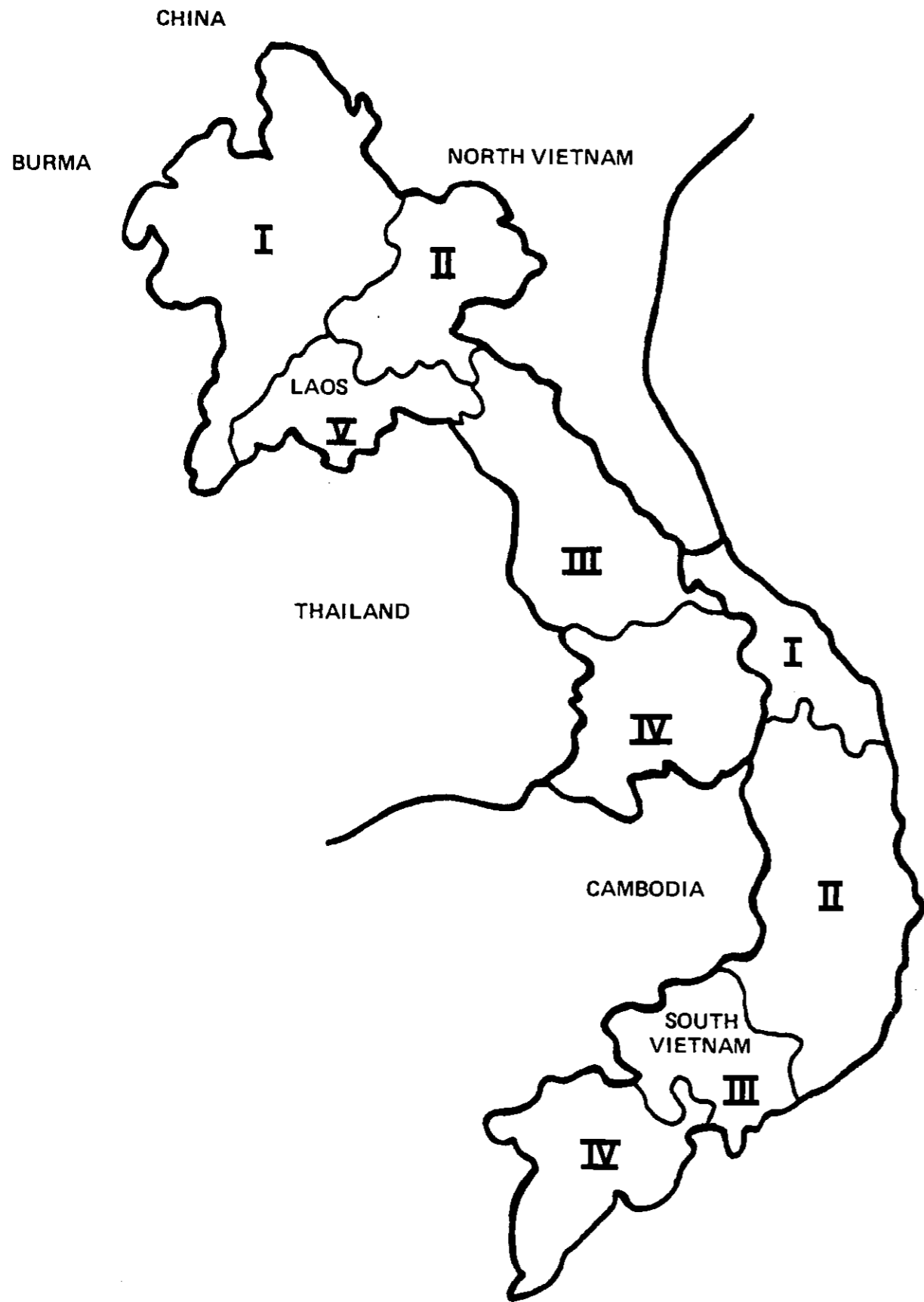
Laos was divided into five military regions two of which were located in the panhandle. (Map 7) Military Region I at Luang Prabang was dominated by the royal family and the former commander in Chief of the Royal Laos Army, General Oune Rathikul. The region commander was Brigadier General Tiao Sayavong, a half brother of the king. The region was located in northwest Laos and covered four provinces: Phong Saly, Houa Khong, Sayaboury and Luang Prabang.

Military Region II, in the northeastern section of Laos, was under Major General Vang Pao, the Meo guerrilla war hero of Laos. It covered two provinces: Houa Phan (Samneua), and Xieng Khouang. The headquarters was at Long Cheng, northwest of the Plain of Jars.

Military Region III in central Laos was headquartered at Savannakhet and covered two provinces; Khammouane (Thakhek) and Savannakhet. This region was commanded by General Bounpon and later by Brigadier General Noupheut Dao Heuang, in July 1971. The real power in this region was the Insixiengmay family led by Minister Leuam Insixiengmay, Vice Premier and Minister of Education.

Military Region IV, with headquarters at Pakse, included the six provinces of southern Laos: Saravane, Attopeu, Champassak, Sedone, Khong Sedone, and Sithandone (Khong Island). It was dominated by the Nachampassak family led by Prince Boun Oum Nachampassak. The commander of Military Region IV was Major General Phasouk S. Rassaphak, a member of the Champassak family. He commanded this area for almost a decade and a half until finally replaced by the author, Brigadier General Soutchay Vongsavanh, in July 1971.

Map 7 - Indochina Military Regions



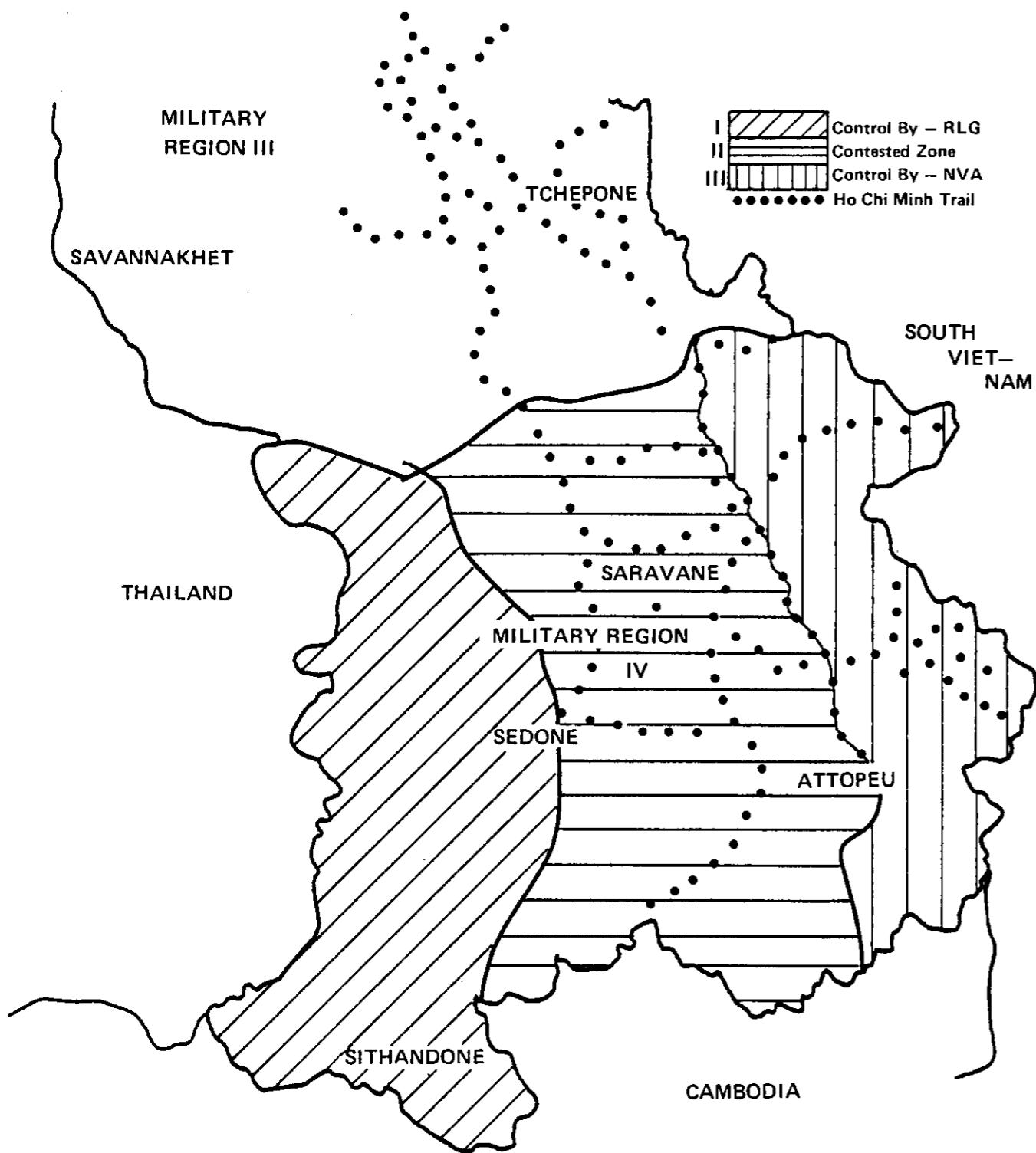
Military Region V contained Borikhane and Vientiane Provinces, the capital province of Laos, was headquartered at Chinaimo Army Camp and was led by Major General Kouprasith Abhay until he was replaced by Brigadier General Thongligh Chokbeng Boun in July 1971.

While I was Chief of Staff for guerrilla forces in Military Region IV, I was frequently called upon to present briefings to headquarters visitors on the military situation in the region. In order to clarify the complex nature of relative security in the southern panhandle, I estimated the areas under the *de facto* control of the opposing forces and illustrated the situation on the map. In mid-1970, zones of control were recognized in this manner as Zone I, or the west zone, from the Thailand border to the east, controlled by the Royal Lao Army; Zone II, or the central zone, was the contested zone; and Zone III, or the east zone, from the South Vietnam border to the west, was controlled by the North Vietnamese Army (NVA). (Map 8) Most of the Ho Chi Minh trail was located in eastern Zone II and along the boundary between Zones II and III.

*Interdiction of the NVA Logistics System
in the Panhandle*

The panhandle of Laos indeed carried the life-blood of the NVA expeditionary force in South Vietnam. Recognizing this, but denied by observance of the 1962 accords the freedom to block the Laos supply corridor with the large infantry formations that would be required, the U.S. and South Vietnam undertook to interdict the trail from the air and through the use of small teams of raiders. As sophisticated and effective as some of the weapons and techniques were, and some were truly devastating in their local effects, none achieved the goal of seriously impeding the flow of men and equipment south. As viewed by the author and discussed in Chapter III even the audacious attack of the South Vietnamese into Tchepone in early 1971 failed to have lasting impact. The attack came years too late, and the force was too small and too lightly supported. But it confirmed for all to see that the Ho Chi Minh trail was a vital area to the North Vietnamese and reinforced, without serious

Map 8 - Zones of Control and the Ho Chi Minh Trail



question, the theory that only the complete blockage of this route could force the North to suspend, if not abandon, its conquest of South Vietnam. It also clearly illustrated the truth that Laos could not be neutral. North Vietnam would never permit it, since true neutrality for Laos would deny the use of its territory for aggression. Tragically, for Laos, South Vietnam, and Cambodia, the United States persisted in its fundamental policy of refusing to upset the 1962 accords to the extent required to sever permanently the Ho Chi Minh trail.

Laos armed forces involvement in air interdiction attempts began in October 1964 with occasional raids by the Royal Laos Air Force (RLAF) T-28s but in 1969 these had to stop because of the effectiveness of the NVA anti-aircraft artillery. Besides, most movement of troops and supplies was conducted during the night when aerial bombing was ineffective.

Following the change of government in Cambodia in 1970, US air efforts against the trail systems increased enormously and the trail defenders steadily increased their anti-aircraft fire in response. The anti-aircraft units had the advantage of knowing when the trucks would be moving, and slower aircraft, such as gunships, forward air control (FAC) planes, and helicopters were relatively easy targets for them. Before 1970, the NVA hid their anti-aircraft guns and would not fire at airplanes in order to remain concealed. After 1970, however, they fired at any plane in range.

Several thousand NVA engineering troops were responsible for upkeep and repair of the trail. The road-builders also built bomb shelters, repair facilities and areas for parking trucks. Gasoline and oil were pumped across the mountains through hidden pipelines and stored in drums to be dropped off at camp sites at regular intervals. Caves were used to conceal material. When the US Air Force bombed to crater the road, the North Vietnamese would build by-passes or fill in the craters. When portions of the road were concealed by large trees, 500 pound bombs were used to blast the trees into barriers, but the North Vietnamese had enough engineer troops and materials to quickly clear the obstacles.

The South Vietnamese had by far the greatest stake in the attempts to stop the NVA use of the Ho Chi Minh trail in the panhandle. While



Camouflaged storage bunker on the Ho Chi Minh trail in the Laos Panhandle. A road-widening bulldozer has cut into the bank revealing the hidden entrance and destroying a bicycle

the greatest weight of the interdiction effort was carried out by the U.S. Air Force, the South Vietnamese conducted a clandestine campaign on the ground against trail installations and traffic.

One might expect that since Laos, Cambodia and South Vietnam were each engaged in a war for their survival as free, independent, non-Communist states against the enemy, North Vietnam, and each was supported by the same great power, the United States, that some extraordinary and effective systems and procedures to coordinate the common effort for the common good must have been devised by them and vigorously supported by the United States. Remarkably, and unfortunately, this was not the case. There was virtually no coordination of combat activity against the North Vietnamese, no communications between the armed forces below the head-of-government level, and very little exchange of information between them.

South Vietnamese Activities in the Panhandle

A link between the armies of Laos and the Republic of Vietnam existed since the creation of the two armed forces. Both armies came from the same source: the French Union Army. Many of the early members, Laotian and Vietnamese, had served as officers, non-coms and soldiers in the same French units during the colonial period. I graduated from the officers' academy at Dong Hene, Savannakhet, and was commissioned second lieutenant in 1953 and consequently had no early contact with the Vietnamese military. Posted to a French-led battalion at Luang Prabang, I was the only Lao platoon leader in my company; the company commander and the other platoon leaders were French.

From 1954, when many tacit agreements were reached, high-level military contact between the two armies continued. Liaison teams of the Vietnamese Special Forces were authorized to enter Laos, mainly around Vientiane, Thakhek, Savannakhet, and Pakse. Under Laos Armed Forces cover, these teams freely operated to collect needed intelligence.

We were well aware that the South Vietnamese command was anxious to gather information concerning the NVA units that were passing through Laos to South Vietnam and were interested in information of the NVA operating in the panhandle. Information related to the NVA and the Viet Cong was collected by our service and passed to them. But the flow of information, at least insofar as I was concerned in MR IV, was one-way only. The Vietnamese kept a colonel, in civilian cover, at my headquarters in Pakse. He maintained close contact with my G-2 who passed him all intelligence of value concerning the NVA in southern Laos. But my G-2 received nothing in return that would help us against the NVA who opposed us in the panhandle. From time to time, NVA prisoners captured by our units asked to be passed to the South Vietnamese teams. These prisoners were released as requested because they were intelligence agents planted by the South Vietnamese in enemy units.

As military region commander, the only US-produced intelligence I received was through my American civilian adviser and the American military attache who from time to time passed me items of high interest, usually gained from sophisticated American sources such as photo and electronic reconnaissance.

But despite the willing cooperation demonstrated by the Laos Armed Forces there was a great lack of prior coordination practiced by South Vietnamese and their American advisers in operations in the Laos panhandle. Many South Vietnamese military operations were conducted without our knowledge. For example, the Vietnamese and US commands in the highlands would dispatch their troops on operations in Laos territory and later find that they needed our help in lifting supplies to them and for transporting the sick or wounded out of the area. We provided helicopters for these services, which we were happy to do, but we would have appreciated being advised in advance. All coordination in these matters was conducted between the Americans and the RLG in Vientiane. The military region commanders had no direct communications with South Vietnamese, nor did the units in the field ever exchange liaison officers. Consequently, there was no coordination of the combat effort in the field.

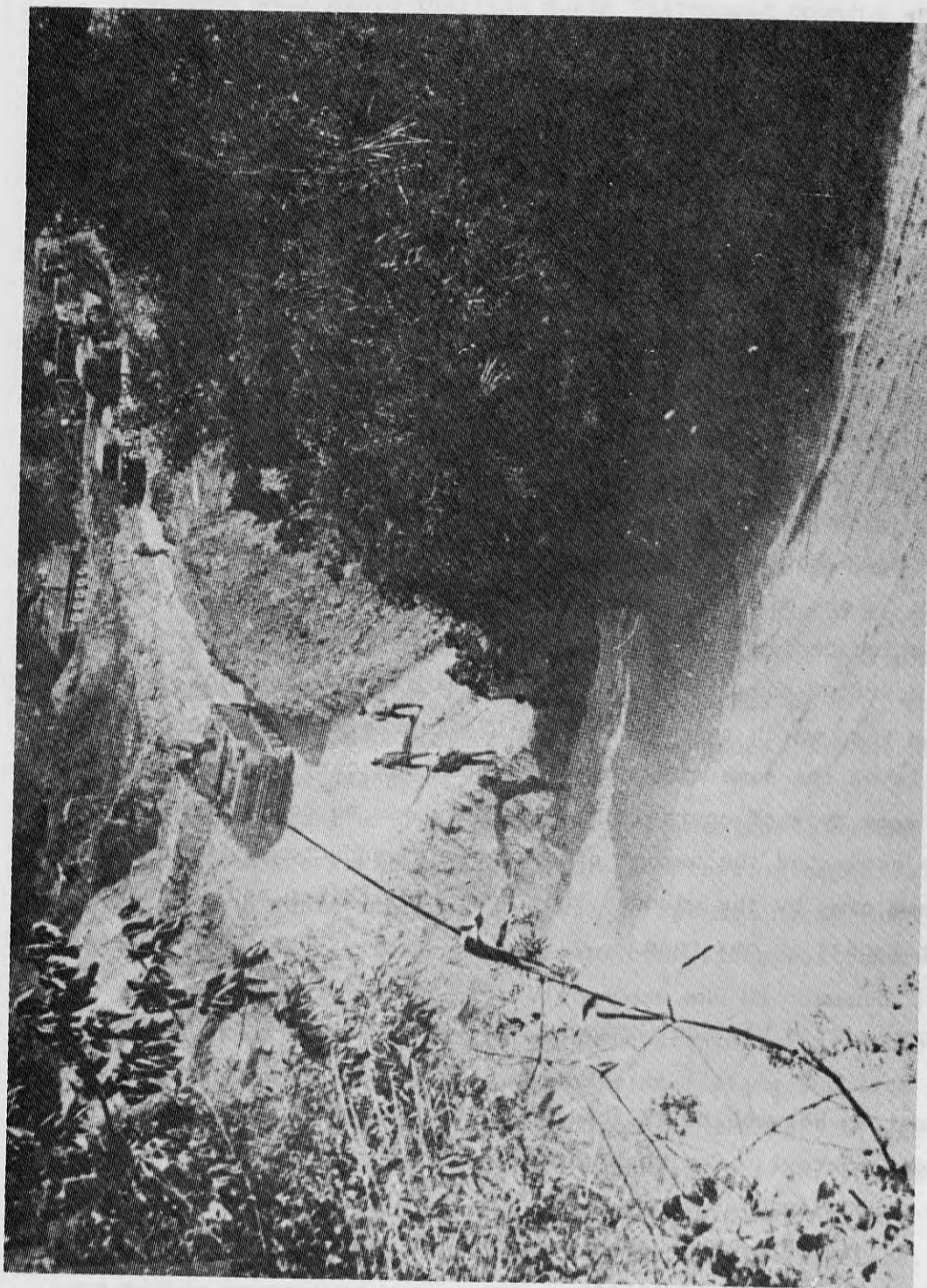
The biggest South Vietnamese operation in Laos was Lam Son 719, but the Laos military knew nothing about it until it happened. Then, radio sources and the press informed us only that a big South Vietnamese operation was taking place somewhere in the southern part of the Laotain countryside. Lam Son 719 took place during the period of neutrality when Laos had adopted a nonpartisan position *vis-a-vis* the Republic of Vietnam and the People's Republic of Vietnam. Laos had made it clear that it preferred to be left out of the struggle between the two Vietnams. Although this was the official political policy, the Laos military still maintained rapport with the South Vietnamese military and when Lam Son 719 started, Prime Minister Souvannaphouma, for the sake of form only, protested to the Republic of Vietnam's Government on the incursion. It was not until later that we in the army were briefed on the operation in our military area of responsibility.

Coordination between us and the South Vietnamese should have been better. We operated many irregular battalions along the Ho Chi Minh trail and had road watch teams observing NVA trucks and calling for air strikes, while at the same time other friendly military units were conducting the same type of operations; but there was no coordination of efforts. We estimated the number of operations conducted by units of the Vietnamese Army by the wounded that were carried out and the helicopters that landed in our zone.

Coordination between Cambodia and Laos in the Panhandle

Coordination between MR IV forces and the Cambodian forces was virtually non-existent. For that matter, there was little to coordinate because the Cambodians would not fight the NVA in the northern bordering provinces. We did offer the Cambodians some training support, but they didn't exploit it to much advantage.

Following the 1970 change of government in Cambodia, the new government, with the tacit agreement of RLA command, sent two battalions of recruits



A South Vietnamese Army Unit advances in the Laos panhandle near Tchepone in Operation Lam Son 719, February 1971

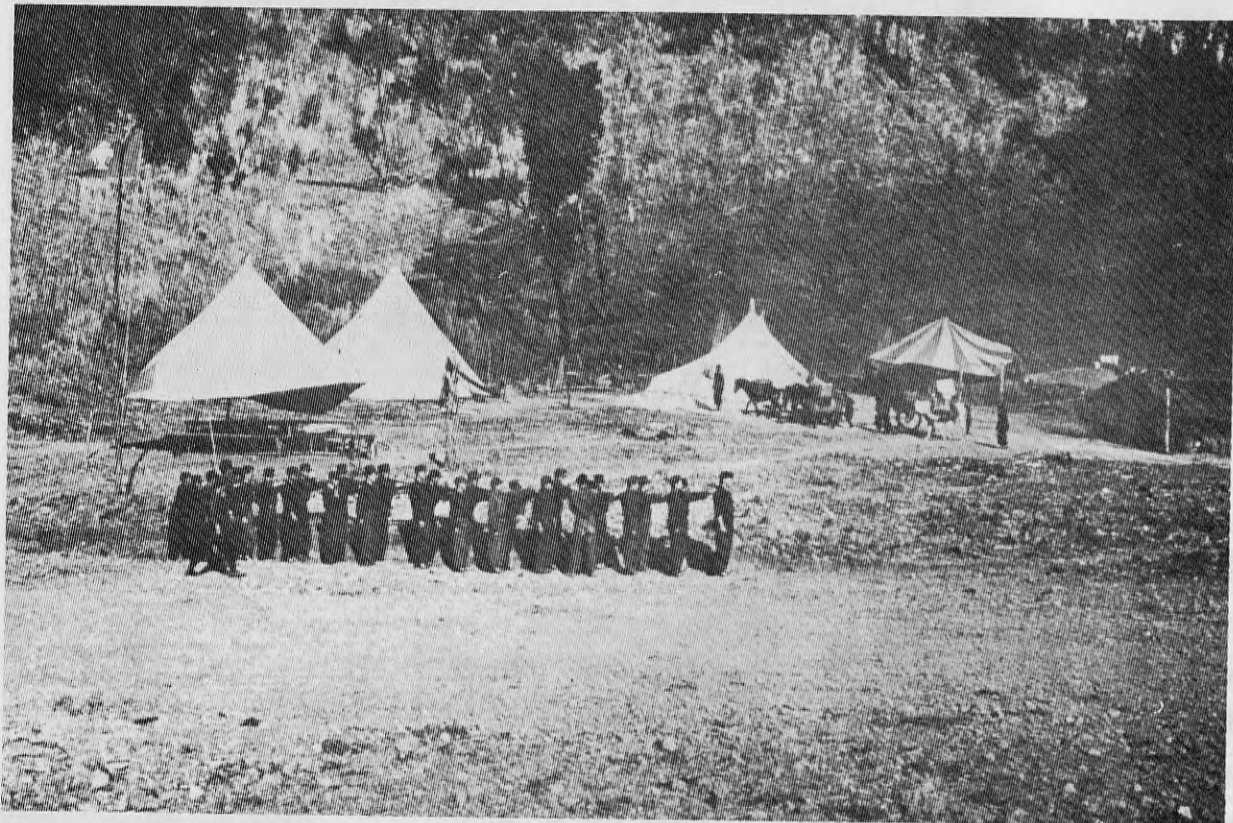
with their cadres, to train in MR IV at PS-18.¹ These new recruits received excellent training and were well motivated during their three months in Laos. After training, the two battalions were sent into combat on the Bolovens Plateau against the NVA. Here they were baptized by fire and identified as Battalion 601 and 602 but they did not fight well; their country had been at peace for a long time and their cadres, trained in the French Army tradition, knew more of theory than of practice. After two months against the NVA in the panhandle they were returned to Cambodia.

In order to maintain liaison with our headquarters, the Cambodian Army sent one colonel to stay in Sithandone Province. His duties included taking care of the Cambodia refugees and serving as Governor of Stung Streng Province as well as the brigade commander of northern Cambodia. He had approximately 300 men with him which he used to send reconnaissance teams into Cambodia to call for air strikes on supply depots or headquarters areas of the Khmer Rouge. But they had never clashed with the enemy in northern Cambodia. The commander appeared to be more interested in collecting information in Laos than in Cambodia, and although he often said that he planned to send the troops into Cambodia, he never did.

Laos Irregulars Before 1970

The concept of organizing, equipping and employing irregular, or guerrilla forces, in southern Laos was never originally considered by the Laos Military Region commanders in MR III or IV. The idea was totally American in its origin and was proposed by Americans to achieve the American objectives of interdicting the Ho Chi Minh trail, an objective that had no direct relationship to RLG security goals.

¹PS-18 was an irregular operating base on the Bolovens Plateau. The letters stood for "Pakse Site," the principal city of the region and the location of headquarters, Military Region IV.



Laos Irregulars in Training at
an Irregular Base Camp on the Plateau des Bolovens Before 1970

Following the conclusion of the First Indochina War in 1954, the armed forces of Laos, in addition to the regular army, included local forces known as Auto Defence de Choc and Auto Defence Ordinaire. By 1968, most of these units had been dissolved and there were three categories of forces in the Royal Laos armed forces. First, the Battalion Volunteer (BV) which were located in each province with the mission of territorial defense; they coordinated with the local administration. Second, the Battalion Infantry (BI), which could be deployed to any of the provinces in the military region and could be sent out to reinforce in other regions. Third, the Special Guerrilla Units (SGU) or irregular forces who were paid by the Americans and used to fight anywhere in Laos.

There were two types of irregular forces in Military Region IV: the Special Guerrilla Unit Battalion (SGU-BN), successor to the Auto Defence de Choc, and the Guerrilla Battalion (GB), successor to the Auto Defence Ordinaire. The SGU-BN had five companies, a staff, and a strength of 550 men. Its mission was to conduct offensive operations and attack NVA and Pathet Lao positions in its zone. It operated on the Ho Chi Minh trail, in the enemy's logistical and security areas. SGU-BNs were also used to reinforce in other military regions. The GB consisted of five companies but never operated as a battalion. The companies were located close to their home villages and were employed to defend the villages. Local people were recruited for these battalions which were approximately 400 men strong. An additional mission of the GB was to support and reinforce the SGU-BN.

Each guerrilla zone had three battalions: one SGU-BN and two GB. The guerrilla zone commander also commanded the SGU-BN.¹ (Chart 1)

The RLA furnished the leaders for the guerrilla forces from the platoon leader to battalion commander and the guerrilla forces in Military Region IV were governed by the orders, regulations, and discipline of the Regular Army.

¹ Guerrilla Zones (GZ) are discussed on p. 39. There were three GZ in MR4 and each GZ commander was subordinate to the MR commander.

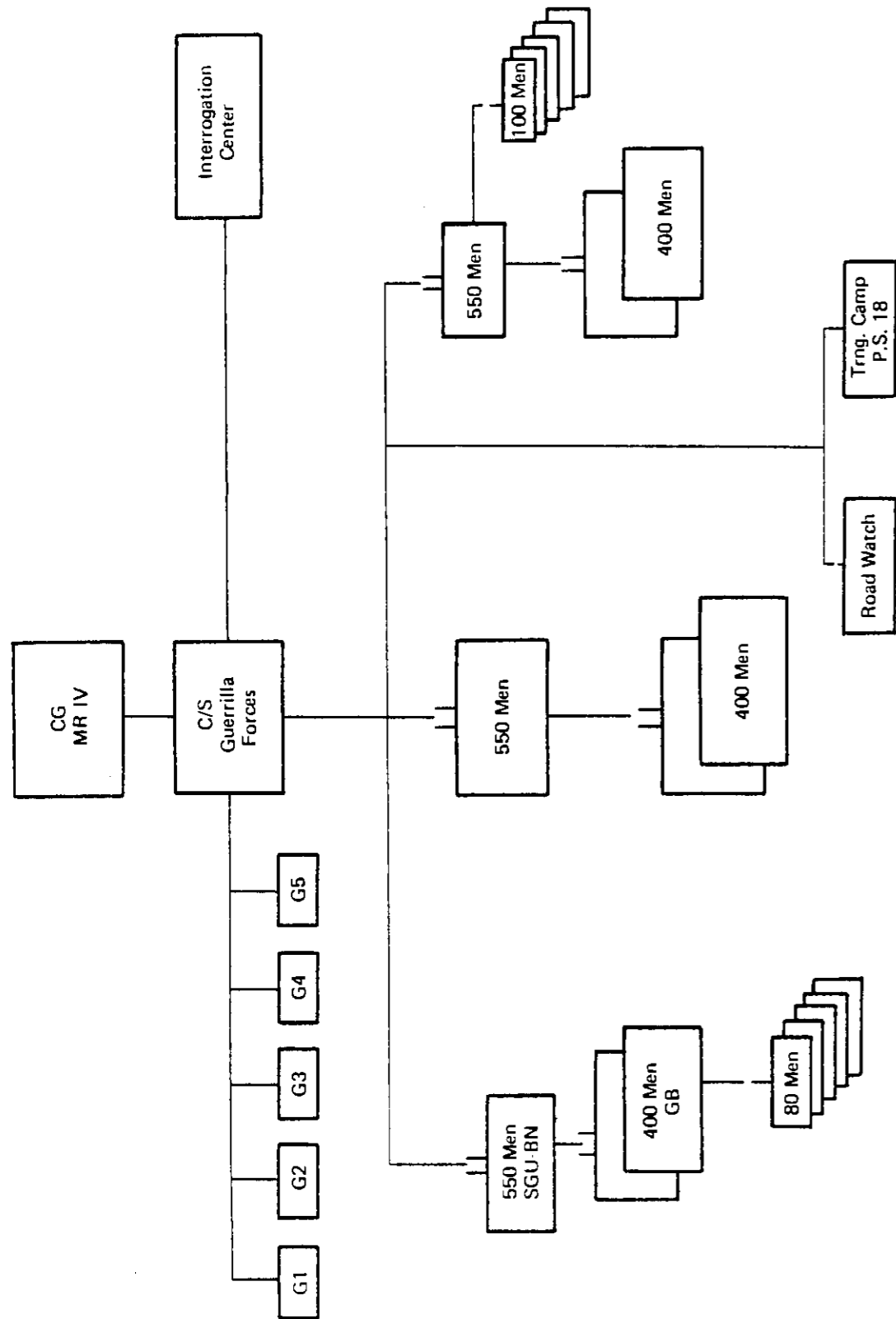


Chart 1 - The Irregular Organization in Military Region IV Before 1970

In 1958, the "Red Prince," Souphanouvong, when challenged with evidence that the NVA had sent two battalions of regular troops to occupy the village of Tchepone in the remote eastern panhandle, replied that this was of no great import because that terrain belonged to Vietnam anyway. While this never became the official RLG position concerning the eastern panhandle, the RLG leadership accepted the reality that it was quite powerless to eject or even interfere with the NVA troops in the panhandle. On the other hand, as it became more and more apparent to the Americans that the NVA was making crucial use of this region to prolong and escalate the war against South Vietnam, the Americans decided to do something about it.

We in Laos understood the difficulty the Americans and South Vietnamese faced. The U.S. was bound to observe the 1962 accords on Laos and could not interfere directly with the NVA in southern Laos. The U.S. had withdrawn, in 1962, all its military personnel except for the attache element in Vientiane. By 1964, the Americans began operations against the NVA logistics and infiltration system in southern Laos by infiltrating small teams of irregulars into the trail system to observe and report activity.

Gradually units of pure Lao composition were organized, and a series of bases -- eventually nine in all -- were established on the eastern rim of the Bolovens Plateau. From these bases raids were conducted against NVA convoys and installations on the Ho Chi Minh trail. The bases contained training areas, barracks, and communications and all eventually had to be fortified when the NVA reacted against them.

Throughout this early period neither the Royal Lao Government nor the Royal Lao Army had anything to do with the organization, equipping or operations of the Lao irregulars. They were supervised and paid exclusively by American civilians who also assigned them their missions. At this time, 1968, my groupement mobile was dissolved. The emphasis that had been placed on the organization of the irregular forces in the Laos armed forces had attracted most of the best officers and NCOs away from the regulars and as a result the groupement mobile had gradually become less and less combat effective. Furthermore, such large organizations under central authority were perceived by the top leadership in Vientiane as constant *coup* threats. Without a command, I was assigned as chief of staff of guerrilla forces in Military Region IV. I had been working closely with the guerrilla forces since 1967, while groupement mobile commander, and as General Phasouk's principal adviser and liaison

officer with the irregulars.

In May 1967, early in my experience of coordinating irregular operations with the Americans in Military Region IV, a plan was developed to interdict the Ho Chi Minh trail east of the Bolovens Plateau. The primary purpose of the operation was to test the speed and effectiveness of the NVA response to a lodgement in this vital part of its trail system. Secondly, I and the Americans wanted to test the irregular forces in a company-sized, airmobile operation. Up to this time, they had operated only as squads and platoons. Thirdly, we wanted to test the procedures for the coordination of direct air support in his environment. The 100-man guerrilla company was loaded into Air America H-34 helicopters -- about 10 soldiers in each aircraft -- and it air-assaulted south of Chavane in the early morning hours.² The NVA reaction was indeed swift and violent. Before any air support could be employed against them, the NVA soldiers overran the position and 12 hours after landing, the company of Laos irregulars was wiped-out. Only 15 men escaped to return to battalion headquarters.

As the Lao irregular units grew in size and number, a greater amount of coordination and cooperation with RLA territorial commands and regular forces became a necessity. Consequently, as chief of staff for irregulars I designated guerrilla zones of operations and executed agreements between the irregulars and the regulars to define rules of coordination. In mid-1968, I divided the area of operations in Military Region IV into three guerrilla zones: (Map 9)

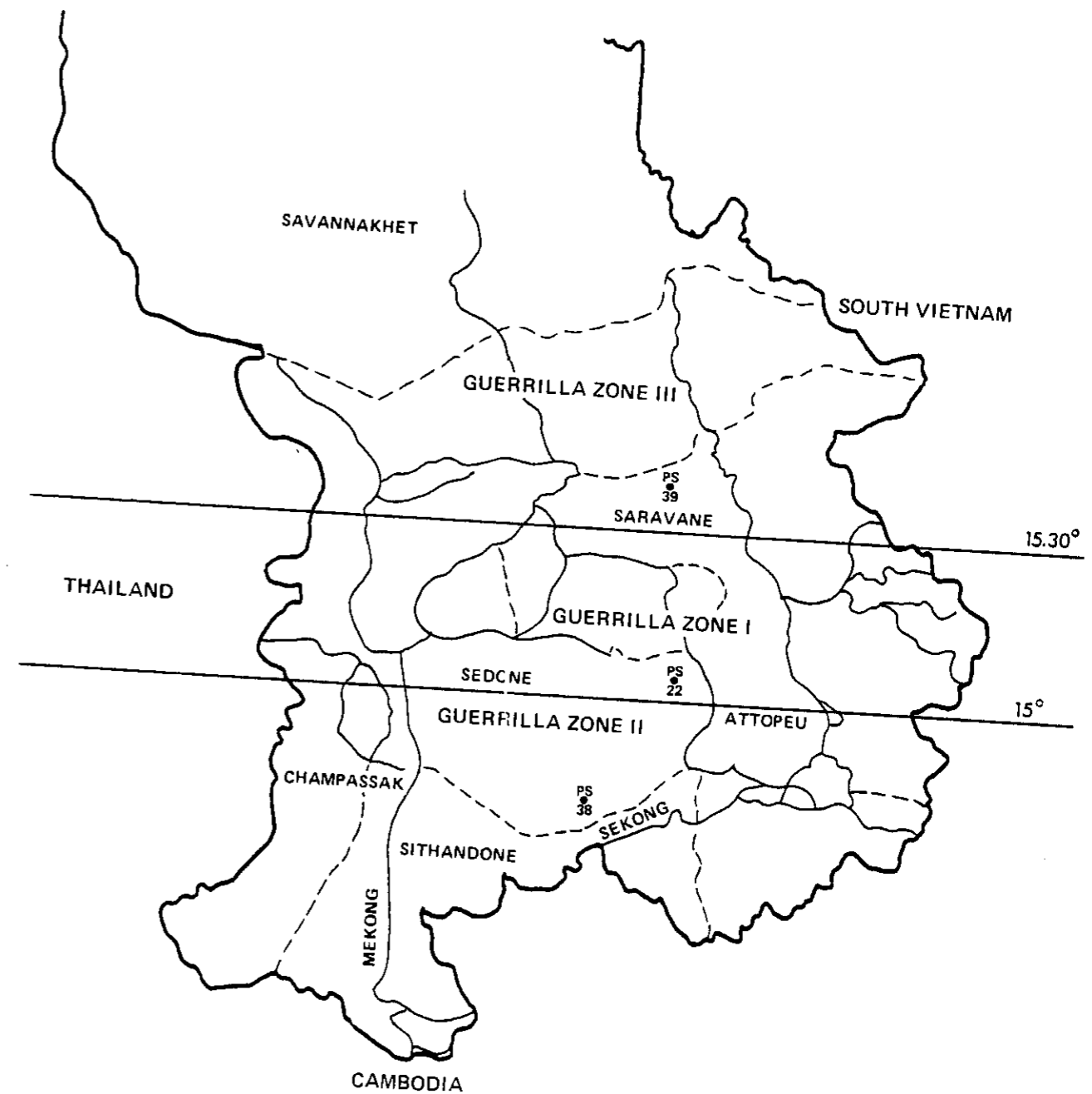
Guerrilla Zone I was located between latitude 15° and 15° 30' and from the South Vietnam frontier to the Thailand frontier. It included the Ho Chi Minh trail around Chavane, and its main base was located at PS-22, east of the Bolovens Plateau.

Guerrilla Zone II was south of Zone I, between latitude 15° and the Cambodia frontier. It included the Sihanouk Trail, Attopeu, Muong May, and the Mekong River. The base was located at PS-38 southeast of Bolovens Plateau.

Guerrilla Zone III was north of Zone I, between latitude 15° 30' and the boundary of Military Region III in Saravane Province and included the Ho Chi Minh trail from Ban Bac to the north and east. The base was located at PS-39, east of Saravane.

² Air America was the U.S. contract carrier in Indochina, civilian-manned.

Map 9 - The Guerrilla Zones In Military Region IV Before 1970



Each guerrilla zone unit was confined to its own area and, to avoid accidents, was not permitted to cross the boundary without prior agreement with the zone commander. They could not operate in a sector assigned to the RLA unless they had the approval of the RLA battalion commander. Coordination, however, continued to be the exception, for unless the irregular unit commander foresaw a possibility of conflict with RLA forces in his intended area of operations, no coordination was attempted. Furthermore, the only missions assigned to irregular units were directly related to interdiction of the Ho Chi Minh trail, not to the preservation of security in southern Laos.

The NVA had well organized road security. They used platoons and trained dogs against our road watch teams. The road watch and action teams in Military Region IV were composed of 12 men each. These teams observed truck convoys along the trail and called for air strikes. Since they could not speak English signals were used in their communications with the U. S. Air Force. They also observed enemy depots and parking areas and gained intelligence through tapping NVA telephone lines. The action teams ambushed and destroyed enemy trucks, ammunition, and POL drums. They also planted anti-tank mines along the trail and photographed trucks destroyed by air raids or anti-tank mines and ambushing.

The teams were taken to their operational areas along the trails by helicopter and covered by T-28s or A1Es during the flight. Occasionally they were sent on foot. Local people were often used in road watch or action teams because they were familiar with the area but this had disadvantages because most of these people had not been trained to perform what was expected of them and their reports could not be relied upon. The enemy also used local people as security teams, but they seemed to sympathize more with us because the enemy had so often used them for hard labor, working them along the trail for long hours with little or no reward for their services, while the RLA did not expect so much from them or use coercion to get them to work.

Laos Irregulars After 1970

North Vietnamese Army actions increased significantly in the panhandle following the *coup* in Cambodia in 1970. In order to gain more territory in western Military Region IV, and to expand the utilization and improve the security of the Ho Chi Minh and Sihanouk trails, the enemy conducted offensive operations with formations up to regimental size, attacking regular and irregular forces in the region. With the closure of the Cambodian ports, the Sihanouk trail gained vital importance as the only major route available for support of NVA forces in central and southern South Vietnam.

I realized that the SGU's were not equipped to deal with the powerful NVA regular forces operating in Military Region IV. As chief of staff for irregular forces in the region, and drawing on my experience as a groupement mobile commander, I began reorganizing the irregular forces in 1970. I had observed through the years of fighting in Laos that independent RLA battalions rarely could operate effectively together as components of a larger force under an unfamiliar commander. The soldiers' and officers' loyalties were too exclusively tied to each's own battalion commander. Furthermore, battalion commanders were slow or reluctant to respond to orders other than those of the military region commander. Consequently, the solution seemed to lie in formally constituting groupement mobiles out of separate irregular battalions. This arrangement would mean that the GM commander would have clear, undiluted authority over promotions and assignments within the GM and, resultingly, receive the loyalty and response he needed from the battalions assigned to the GM. The process of reorganization was completed by October 1971 when the first irregular GM was committed against the NVA.

The GM was composed of four guerrilla battalions and one weapons company. (*Chart 2*) The battalion strength was 300 men; 16 officers and 284 enlisted men. (*Chart 3*) Each rifle company had four officers and 93 enlisted men, with three 30-man rifle platoons. In addition to the

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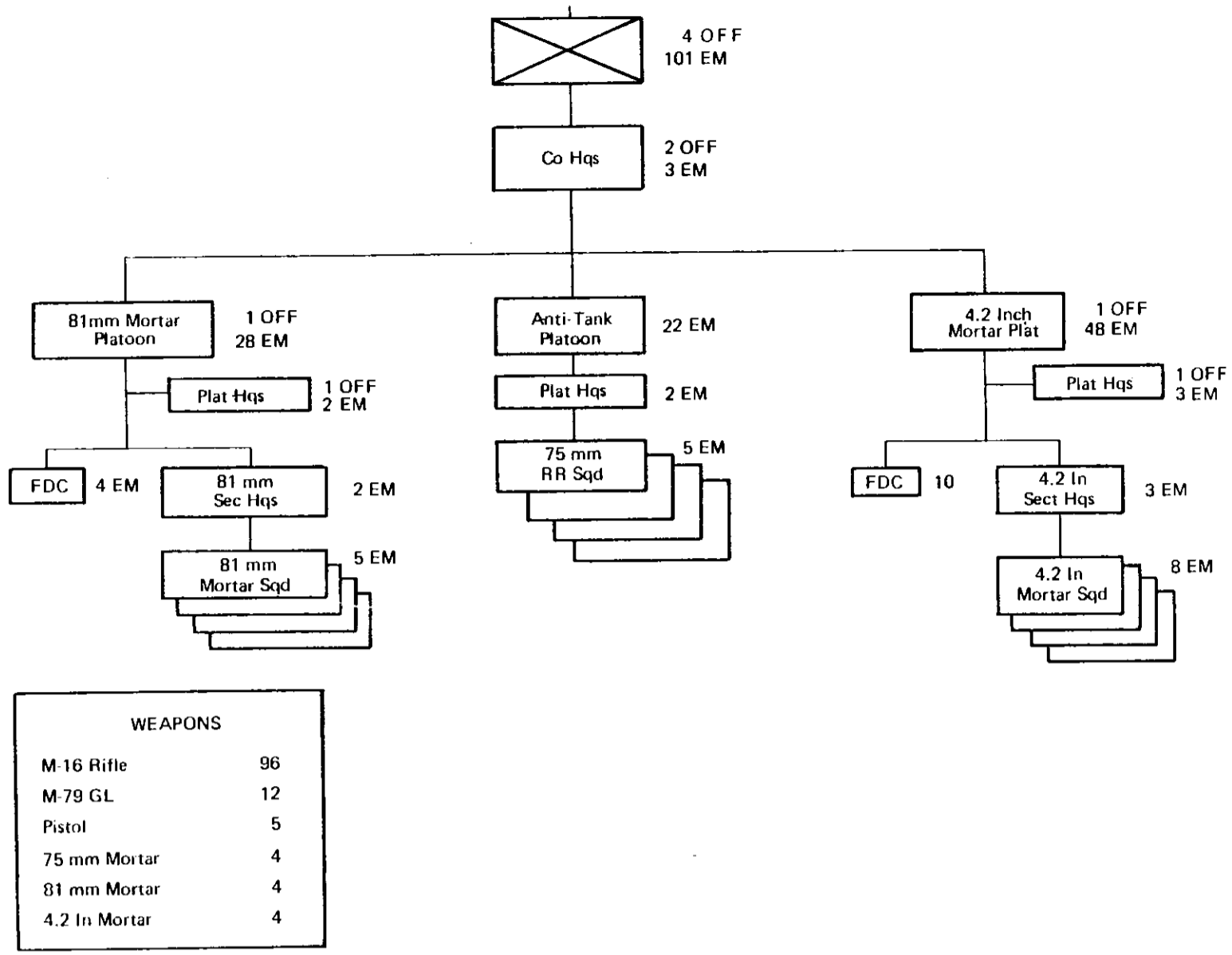


Chart 2 – Lao Irregular Heavy Weapons Company (Organic to GM)



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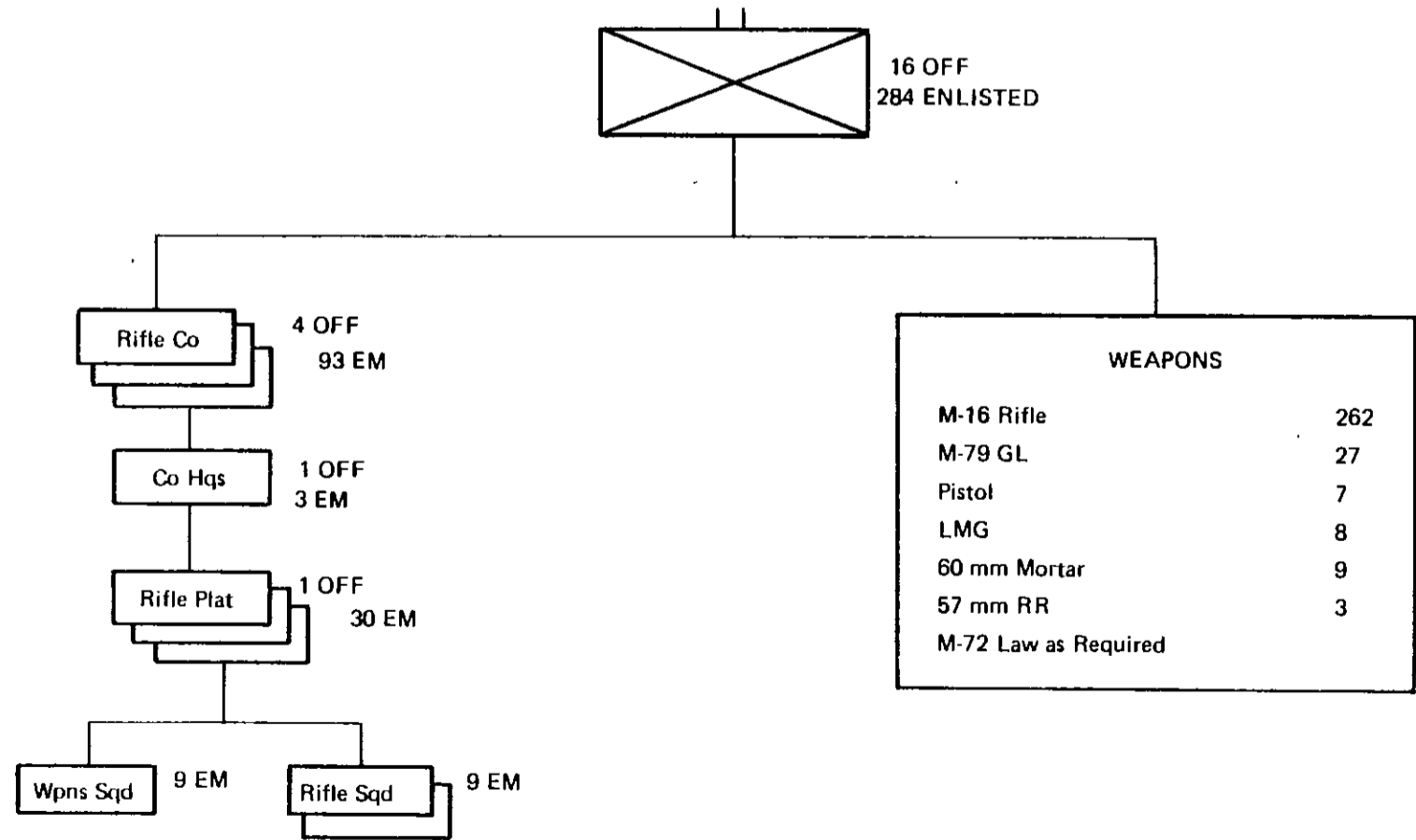


Chart 3 – Lao Irregular Battalion (Organic to GM)

M-16 rifles carried by its riflemen, the battalion had M-79 grenade launchers, M-72 light antitank weapons, eight light machine guns, nine 60-mm mortars, and three 57-mm recoilless rifles.

There were three GM in Military Region IV and one battalion of replacements in reserve at the training camp at PS-18. (Chart 4) There were four GM in Military Region III and two battalions of replacements in reserve at the training camp at Savannakhet. (Chart 5)

I was appointed MR IV commander in July 1971. With this position came the additional duty of commander of all Laos irregular units in the region. Each of the irregular bases on the Bolovens Plateau was commanded by an irregular colonel and was the base-camp of up to three irregular battalions. All offensive missions against the Ho Chi Minh trail assigned to irregular formations until the cease-fire came from the American leadership which was interested primarily in reducing the flow of men and supplies to Vietnam. These missions were subject to my approval as region commander. The missions originated with the American leadership in Vientiane and were passed to the Americans in Pakse who discussed them with me. I never found it necessary to deny a mission for the irregulars but sometimes, because of military necessity, had to refuse to supply regular support for an irregular mission. It was apparent to me that some of the missions given to my irregulars were not discussed, except in general terms after the action was over, with my superiors in Vientiane.

After the Cambodia coup of 1970 and the westward expansion of the Ho Chi Minh and Sihanouk trails, I frequently found it necessary to employ the irregular battalions in a conventional infantry role. The Americans were still paying the irregular troops, but I was responsible for recruiting the troops for the irregular units and delivering them to the irregular bases.

Command Problems

Early in my career as an officer in the Laos Army I became aware of some of the peculiarities of the Laos political and social structure

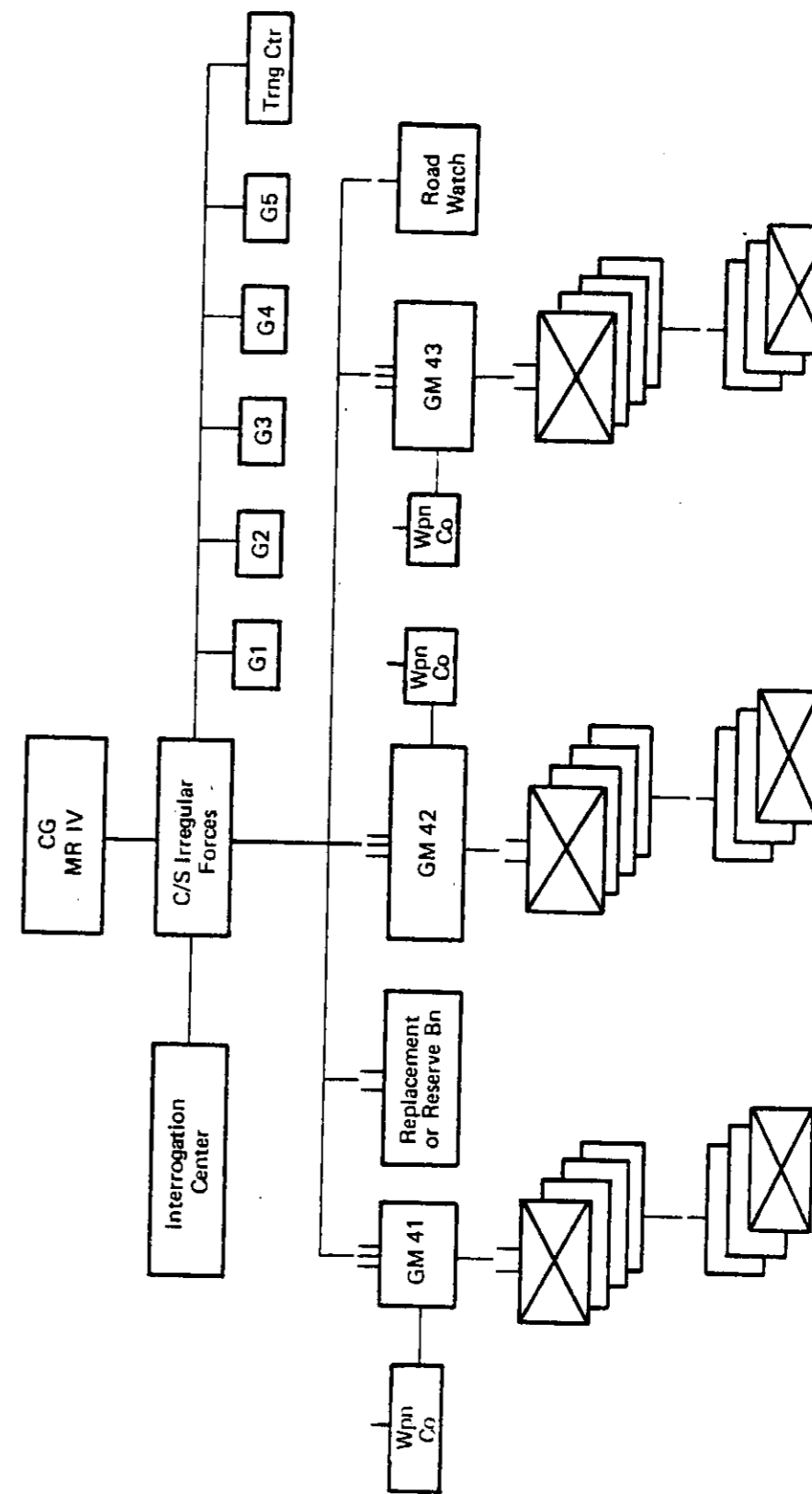


Chart 4 — The Organization Irregular Forces in MR IV After 1970

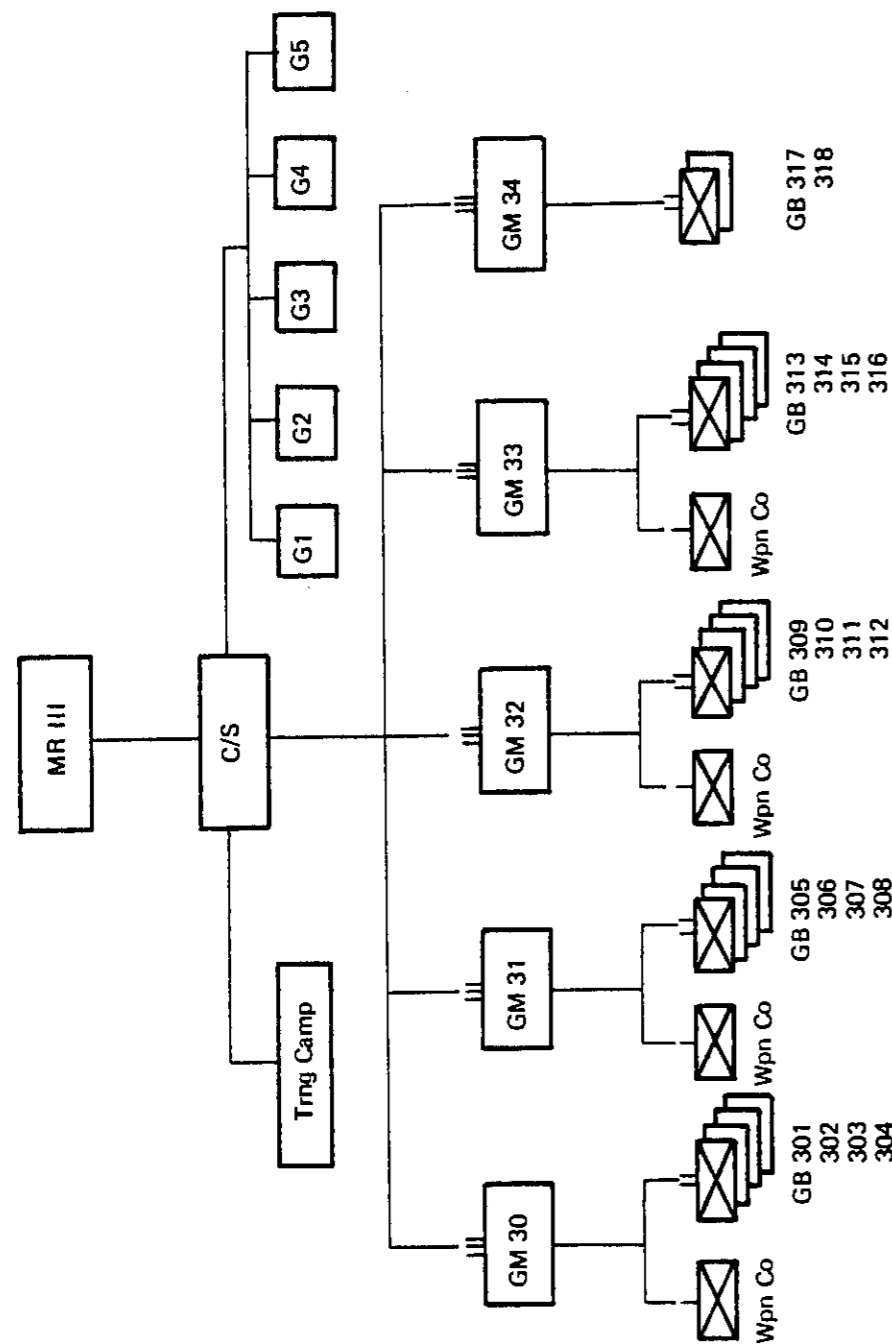


Chart 5 — Organization of Irregular Forces in Military Region III After 1970

that influenced the exercise of command in our army, but it was not until I reached the level of regimental command that these influences became real problems. Then, when I became region commander, these and other command problems occupied a great deal of my time.

Prior to May 1971, the RLA in MR IV was charged with a territorial security mission. This role enabled the 23 battalions of Royalist and Neutralist forces to be employed near population centers where recruiting was relatively easy. Additionally, since there was little chance that these units would be employed in actual combat, their present-for-duty strength was always relatively high. There were also excellent opportunities for the MR IV Commander, General Phasouk, to confer political appointments on relatively poor officers without exposing their ineptness since they were constantly employed in static defensive positions performing routine guard duty and little or no combat, even against the equally inept Pathet Lao forces in their areas. The loyalty of these forces depended largely on who appointed the battalion commander; in almost all cases it was the military region commander. With the exception of the infantry battalion on Khong Island, where the battalion commander was appointed by General Kouprisith, General Phasouk appointed the Royalist battalion commanders and his brother, Colonel Khamsouk, ostensibly the Neutralist commander in MR IV, the Neutralist battalion commanders.³ With this situation, the regular battalions could not be depended upon for other than the most mundane garrison duties.

Before I became military region commander, the guerrilla force commanders were appointed by General Phasouk also, but in these cases the American advisers had some influence since the troops were paid and supplied by the Americans. Although Phasouk continued to attempt to place his cronies in these lucrative command positions (lucrative because they received pay from the RLG as well as from the Americans, in addition to being in a position to siphon from the top of the troop's

³General Kouprasith was the most powerful military figure in Vientiane. Not only was he commander of Military Region V, the region in which the capital was located, but he was related to the Sananikone family which, in turn, was the most powerful political family in the capital and among the wealthiest in Laos.

messaging funds and combat pay), his attempts were largely negated by the almost daily supervision of the irregular battalion commanders by their American supporters. A battalion commander's weaknesses were soon exposed and relief was quickly forthcoming.

During the period when the irregular forces were charged primarily with operations against the Ho Chi Minh trail structure in the southeast panhandle, the operations were far removed from population centers and the MR IV commander had little knowledge or interest in them. It also is questionable just how much these battalions, operating in 50-man teams, contributed to the war effort. It was a constant hit and run situation with the irregulars doing little hitting and a lot of running. The North Vietnamese were securing the trail structure with regular troops and the 50-man guerrilla teams posed little real threat to them. Still, their presence provided information for the conduct of air strikes and occasionally the troops made a good hit.

Prior to December 1970, the war in MR IV was fought away from Pakse and really meant little to the Lao power structure in MR IV or in Vientiane. Then in December of 1970, the North Vietnamese struck at PS-22 on the eastern edge of the Bolovens Plateau. The NVA raid dispersed the regular battalion, commanded by one of Phasouk's inept brothers, and the irregular battalion which were in the PS-22 garrison. I was ordered to PS-22 to take command of the situation and restore the defense of the shattered camp. Realizing that the RLA troops in the area were scattered and not dependable. I picked up an airborne battalion from Savannakhet -- one commanded by an officer who had commanded a company for me in the past -- and took this battalion with me to PS-22. We reoccupied the camp and rounded-up the irregulars who were hiding out in the forest around the camp. I sent Phasouk's battalion of regulars back to Pakse, since it was of no use to me. The NVA attacked again the next morning with artillery, mortars, and recoilless rifles, followed by an infantry assault, but my airborne troops held and we kept PS-22. Although the attack on PS-22 struck some of the Lao in MR IV with the realities of the war, it did not jar them into action.

As alluded to earlier, family power and relationships were real forces to be reckoned with in Laos. These forces, furthermore, were the sources of the most serious problems of command I faced while commander of the MR IV.

Of course, the organization and operation of irregular forces in southern Laos were complex activities because authority was shared by the Americans and the region commander, and this constituted a command problem of some magnitude -- but this problem paled in the light of the difficulties I faced in attempting to execute my command responsibilities in the domain of the large and powerful Nachampassak clan in southern Laos. I succeeded in command General Phasouk S. Rajpheck, a member of the Champassak family, who had been in command for well over ten years. RLA regulations specified a maximum tour of command of three years for this post, but, regulations notwithstanding and in the face of repeated attempts by Americans and influential Lao officials to have him removed, General Phasouk held on. He had two brothers, colonels in the RLA, occupying command positions in the military region -- Colonel Samrane and Colonel Khamsouk -- and another relative, Sisouk Nachampassak, was minister of defense. (While Prince Souvannaphouma was prime minister, he discovered that he could not properly execute his leadership duties and handle the defense portfolio as well, so he asked Sisouk to be defense minister). Each time an effort was made to relieve Phasouk, Prince Boun Oum, the leader of the family, and cousin to the king and the prime minister, would say no.

Finally, however, the pressures became too great, and Sisouk responded to General Oudone Sananikone's request (General Oudone was Chief of Staff) and appointed me the new MR IV commander. As General Oudone told me later, he had argued for a new commander to be chosen not from the south -- for it was certain that any officer from Prince Boun Oum's territory would be Boun Oum's man and just as unresponsive to direction from the general staff as was Phasouk -- but from another region and not under Nachampassak influence. Although I commanded a GM in the south, my home was in the north in Luang Prabang.

Duly appointed, I took command of MR IV on July 1, 1971. My troubles began immediately. First, General Phasouk refused to move from the headquarters. When he finally did, three months later, he returned each weekend and signed orders and directives to a number of the battalions assigned to MR IV. These units were all commanded by relatives of Phasouk and continued to give him their loyalty and to respond to his orders which were generally to avoid any action against the PL or NVA. Examples were BI 20 at Paksong, and later south of Pakse, which belonged to Phasouk's brother Samrane; BI 7, which belonged to Phasouk; and BC 207 which belonged to Phasouk's brother Khamsouk. BV 49 on Khong Island was under the personal influence of General Kouprasith. When I first tried to issue orders to these battalions, the commanders would say that they must first check with Phasouk. The response was usually negative so I learned to do without them until I was eventually able to get some of these commanders replaced. It was not until the end of 1972 that General Phasouk gave up this practice, and I never really gained absolute control over all the units assigned to my command.

The other problem of divided responsibility and command -- that the irregulars responded to orders from Vientiane (and American orders at that) rather than from my Pakse headquarters -- was worrisome and obviously did not enable me to employ my forces to the best advantage for the missions I was assigned. Nevertheless, considering the fact that the irregular mission was Ho Chi Minh trail interdiction and not area defense as mine was, I was able to reconcile myself to this situation without great strain. Furthermore, as the war heated-up in the Bolovens Plateau, the irregulars more and more responded to my direction, and coordination between the Royal Lao Army and the irregular formations improved from necessity.

The final chapter in the brief history of the Lao irregulars was written after the 1973 cease-fire terminated American support and guidance. The Americans were no longer interested in interdicting the Ho Chi Minh and Sihanouk trails, the NVA had greatly multiplied its strength in the panhandle, and the RLG could not assume the support of the irregular battalions. The irregulars were doomed. Eligible officers and soldiers were integrated into the RLA while those not eligible were discharged. This part of the story of the dissolution of the Royal Lao Army is discussed in Chapter V.

CHAPTER III

The Initiation of Conventional Warfare in Southern Laos

Successful operations conducted by RLG guerrilla action teams in the Ho Chi Minh trail area in MR III and MR IV caused increasing concern among the Pathet Lao and NVA forces in South Laos and they responded by creating special units to find and destroy the "team soldiers," as the Lao irregular units were known to the enemy. Increasing the size of our teams was countered by an increase in the size of the enemy units sent out to deal with them; if the irregulars used a section, the enemy used a platoon, etc. A change in tactics was obviously required.

For operations in contested areas, irregular companies were deployed. Twelve-man teams were sent into the Ho Chi Minh trail area to conduct mining, ambushes, and raids on soft targets. Administratively, battalions controlled the operations and administration of the companies. The technique was to have one company operating in the trail area, broken down in teams, one company operating in the contested area at company strength and the remaining company of the battalion in reserve and training status. The "team soldiers" became more experienced in operations, including the use of tactical air, both RLAF and USAF. The enemy responded by attacking our companies in contested areas with PL formations from company up to battalion size. We found that this PL tactic created favorable opportunities to attack the larger enemy units with tactical air strikes and inflict heavy casualties upon them while units were in contact.

Later, as enemy units increased in size and combat power, we found it was better for morale and efficiency to deploy battalions as battalions; that is, a battalion's mission was either team operations

under company control, to operate the entire battalion as a battalion in the field, or training and rest for the whole battalion at a time. Experience and hard fighting produced a tough cadre, loyal to individual battalion commanders who proved themselves as capable officers. The influx of NVA units, more heavily armed and supported was also being felt; our tactics had rendered the PL almost ineffective in all of South Laos. It was interesting to note that when a battalion was hit hard and scattered by a superior enemy force, it always reported, "we are now operating as teams."

As late as mid-1970, while I was still C/S, Guerrilla Forces MR IV, NVA battalions usually operated at less than full strength and their armament consisted of light infantry weapons including SKS rifles, AK-47s, sub-machine guns, and 60-mm and 82-mm mortars. Occasionally NVA units would conduct 122-mm rocket attacks against large urban areas. The original mission of NVA units in South Laos was to protect the logistics system moving supplies and men into South Vietnam. As the war in South Vietnam escalated, the NVA high command expanded the system which up to then was confined to the border areas of Laos, South Vietnam and Cambodia. The success of the trail interdiction operations, especially the heavy US air effort, compelled the NVA to disperse and multiply the routes it used through the panhandle. Furthermore, the NVA leadership was well aware of the American reluctance to conduct air strikes close to populated areas in southern Laos. They correctly concluded that if they could shift the logistics system westward into the Mekong and Bolovens region, tucked up against and inside this relatively densely populated area, they could avoid much of the damage being inflicted by US fighter-bombers and B-52s. They, therefore, began moving supplies over roads on the Bolovens Plateau and on the rivers such as the Sekong and the Mekong. To protect this expansion of the logistical effort, the NVA reinforced infantry units in the south in order to confine Laos forces largely to the defense of the cities of Pakse and Savannakhet and prevent them from harassing the line of communications.

Another event had a profound influence on the NVA strategy to shift its logistical network westward in the Laos panhandle. This was the

Cambodian *coup* of 15 March 1970. Before the *coup* Cambodia was technically neutral but steadily leaning to the left. Prince Sihanouk supported the North Vietnamese by letting them use Sihanoukville as a port for receiving their equipment by sea from North Vietnam. The North Vietnamese had no respect for the neutrality of Cambodia and for as long as half of a decade they occupied military sanctuaries all along the Cambodia frontier with South Vietnam; the sanctuaries extended as far as twenty miles into Cambodia. These sanctuaries were used as safe areas from which to launch attacks on the American and South Vietnamese forces and contained major base camps, training sites, hospitals, general logistics, weapons and ammunition depots, air strips (which they used for liaison flights) and prisoners of war compounds.

After the installation of the new government in Cambodia led by Marshal Lon Nol, the NVA and VC in Cambodia were cut off from their supplies through the port of Sihanoukville. Until the change of government in Cambodia, the North Vietnamese supply trail structure running through southeastern Laos into northeastern Cambodia and into South Vietnam was generally confined to the jungled areas. There was little or no population and the area was of no particular strategic importance to the RLG. Only a limited supply flow went into northern Cambodia to support the fledgling Communist movement there. The Sekong River at the eastern base of the Bolovens Plateau through Attopeu provided the North Vietnamese with a natural supply route although up to this time they made but limited use of it.

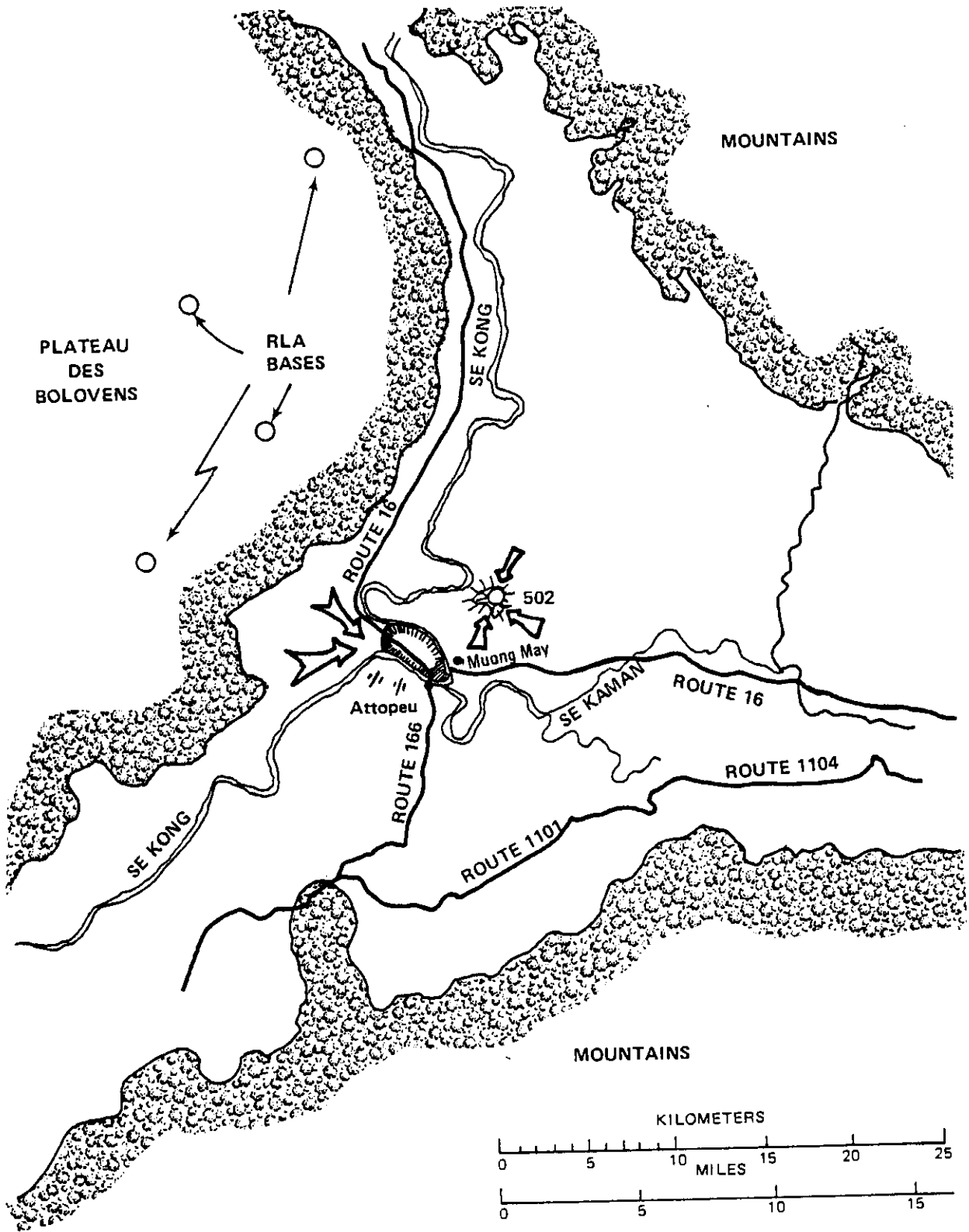
Despite the full weight of American bombing operations, Ho Chi Minh trail truck traffic increased day by day and the NVA continued to improve the road network, keeping passages open and making roads suitable for high-speed traffic. They also took all steps possible to reduce the effectiveness of US bombing. The bombs made movement along the trail very risky; some of the bombs were fused for delayed action, timed to detonate hours after they were buried in the ground to discourage the road maintenance crews. NVA engineers also improved and expanded the Sihanouk trail and large amounts of rice reached NVA troops fighting in the central highlands of South Vietnam by this route.

To expand and protect the network, the NVA deemed it necessary to eliminate any possible direct threat which could be posed by RLA forces at Attopeu and Saravane. Prior to this time, forces garrisoned at these two major population centers in South Laos had posed no threat to the North Vietnamese because of the ineptness of the RLA and the general "arrangement" between RLA and North Vietnamese forces that neither would bother the other. This relationship between the RLA and the NVA was most prevalent around Saravane and Attopeu and was based upon the commercial dealings of some RLA commanders with the NVA. It amounted essentially to the trading of rice and other commodities needed by the NVA and was carried on through Pathet Lao agents. It began while Phasouk was commanding at Attopeu and continued after he became commanding general of the military region. Because of the profits that accrued to Phasouk and his commanders, no serious efforts could be mounted against this illegal traffic. The NVA eventually put a stop to it when it no longer suited its purposes; that time arrived when Lon Nol deposed Sihanouk. The small NVA operations in the western panhandle would be expanded and these operations would require more terrain, more security and more reliable logistics. The first objective that would be seized to further the NVA objectives would be Attopeu.

Attopeu

Attopeu, situated just below the southeastern escarpment of the lofty Plateau de Bolovens, was the province capital but it had been an isolated enclave since 1962. (Map 10) Although it was clearly in view of the RLA positions on the rim of the Plateau, all supply and evacuation of the town had to be by air. The NVA secured Muong May, just across the Sekong River from Attopeu and controlled all land access to the province. Not only were the Sekong and its tributary, the Sekaman which joined it at Attopeu, important elements in the Ho Chi Minh trail system, but National Route 16 led eastward toward the South Vietnam border and joined other parts of the trail system into South Vietnam near Dakto in Kontum Province. In fact, it was less than 50 miles from Attopeu to

Map 10 – The Battle of Attopeu



Dakto. Attopeu thus became a key feature in the NVA logistics system supporting forces in Cambodia as well as in South Vietnam.

The RLA maintained two battalions in Attopeu, one of which out-posted Hill 502 northeast of the town. Infantry Battalion 4 of the old, dissolved Groupement Mobile was there along with Bataillon Volontaire 43 when two NVA infantry battalions launched the attack in April 1970. Supported by 82-mm mortars and 107- and 122-mm rocket artillery, the NVA infantry hit the outpost on Hill 502 first, but the main attack surprised the defenders by coming from the west, closing off the narrow peninsula formed by the bend in the Sekong. With their mortars and rockets ideally sited on the south flank of the RLG positions, the NVA infantry swiftly overran the defense. Dispersed and leaving about 150 of their comrades dead on the field, scattered remnants of the two RLG battalions escaped through the NVA lines or across the Sekong, some to be later caught, along with many fleeing civilians, in well-laid ambushes. Attopeu belonged to the NVA. Saravane was next.

Saravane

Like Attopeu, Saravane was also the capital of its province and it too was a river town situated on the Sedone River and astride a major section of the Ho Chi Minh trail system. About 50 miles north of Attopeu, Saravane was at the junction of National Route 23, which led north to the vital Tchepone area, Route 16 which ran west to Khong Sedone, and other lateral roads and trails that joined other parts of the Ho Chi Minh trail east toward the A Shau Valley of South Vietnam.

The administrative capital of Saravane Province had been removed to the security of Khong Sedone, but it still had a population of up to 20,000 people. Until early 1970, the North Vietnamese were content to bypass Saravane on the east and did not challenge the single RLG battalion (BV 41) and its three attached armored-car platoons which was charged with the defense of the town. But, as mentioned earlier, the weight of the US bombing effort on the Ho Chi Minh trail impelled the NVA to shift some of the logistical operations westward, seeking the

passive protection provided by the proximity of the population centers located there.

In May 1970, one month following the seizure of Attopeu, two regular NVA battalions attacked Saravane. The rifle companies of BV 41 which were deployed on outposts and blocking positions as far as 20 kilometers from the town, were not even in position to take part in the battle. The two battalions of NVA infantry concentrated and quickly disposed of the RLA battalion headquarters in Saravane while the companies of BV 41 individually withdrew to Khong Sedone.

Military Region IV gathered some forces — Parachute Battalion 104, BI-4 (reorganized after its withdrawal from Attopeu) and BV 41 — and two days later launched a counterattack. The NVA had strong defenses prepared by this time, supported by artillery and mortars, and the attack failed.

Prior to this time, the RLA had seen little or no combat. The irregulars were organized into 50-man teams for the purpose of conducting raids and ambushes along the Ho Chi Minh trail. In this combat organization they posed no threat to regular NVA units. Further weakening the RLG position in MR IV at this time, two irregular battalions were deployed to MR II to help salvage a rapidly deteriorating situation there. These two battalions gave good accounts of themselves and became the foundation of what was to be a well-organized, conventional, light infantry force under the "irregular" guise in MR IV.

Despite the NVA seizure of Attopeu and Saravane, senior RLA commanders in MR IV tended to disregard the threat. They regarded the attacks against Saravane, Attopeu and the eastern Bolovens for what they were: an expansion of the NVA trail network, and they recognized that there was little that they could do about it with the small, poorly led and inexperienced RLA units. The general attitude was that this was a problem between the South Vietnamese, Americans and North Vietnamese. As a result of this attitude, RLA forces suffered little in the attacks, giving up ground in great chunks in exchange for relatively light casualties.

In 1970, the NVA 9th Infantry Regiment, which had fought against the US Marines in Hue, South Vietnam during 1968, was sent to Laos to prepare to capture the irregular operating bases on the Plateau de Bolovens. From mid-1970 the NVA continued to reinforce in southern Laos until the 968th Group became a division-sized unit consisting of the 9th, 19th and 29th Infantry Regiments, supported by tanks and artillery. An independent infantry regiment, the 39th, also was organized to operate in South Laos. The 559th Transportation Group retained command of the logistics system.

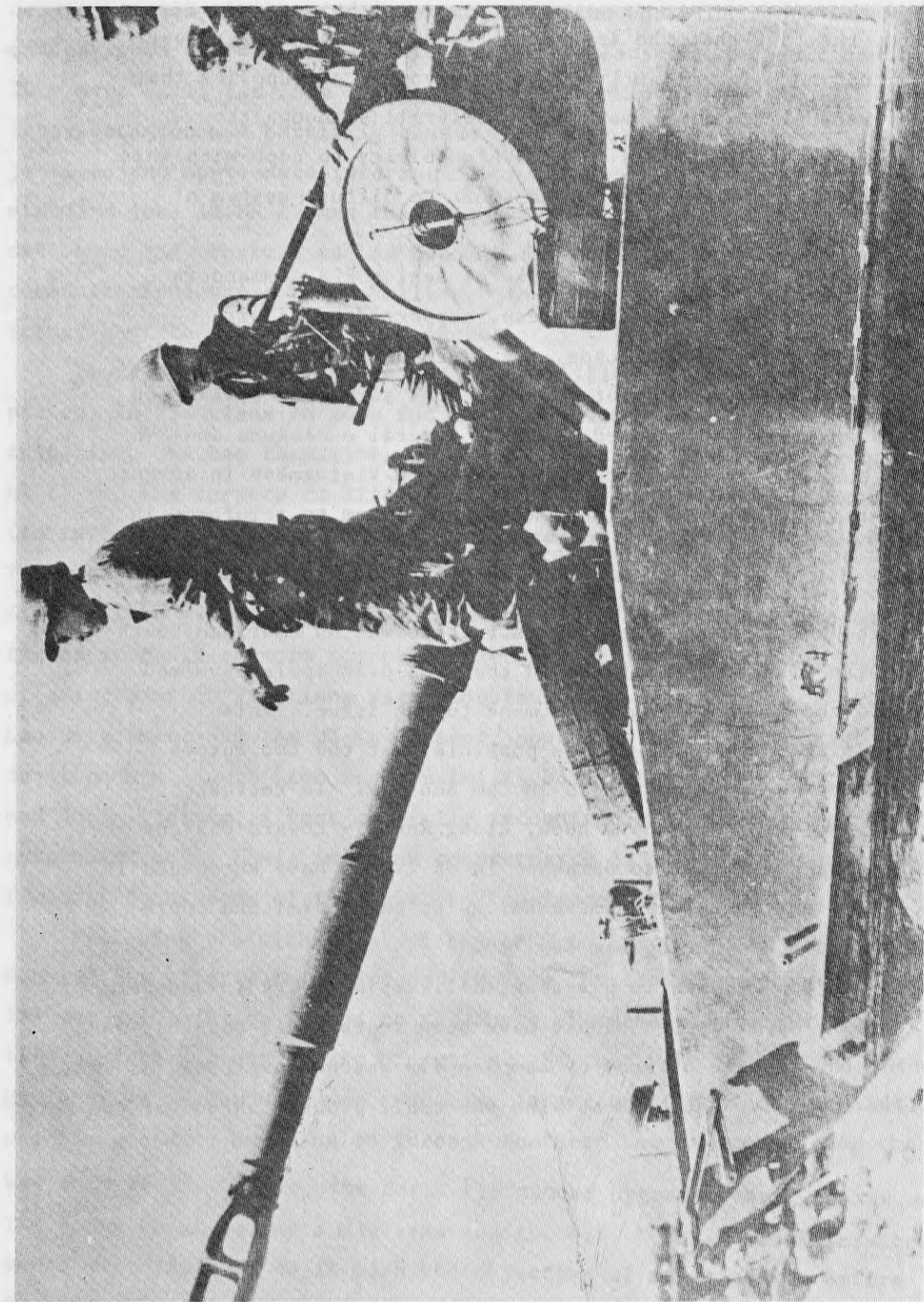
By February 1971, the North Vietnamese had expanded their holdings in southern Laos considerably. While this provided a buffer for the trail structure, it also provided a large land mass for which it was necessary to provide security. They had large numbers of engineer troops, coolies and security forces along the trail rapidly expanding it for the coming dry season supply offensive which was to be launched when the rains abated in the fall of 1971. They had already completed a significant portion of the supply network. While this system was primarily designed to provide for a rapid flow of supplies, it was to play a significant role in the North Vietnamese containment of the South Vietnamese thrust into southern Laos during Lam Son 719 by providing rapid lateral as well as north-south avenues of approach for NVA.

Tchepone

In February 1971, the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN), with heavy US air support, invaded Laos in the region of Tchepone and the Ho Chi Minh trail in Operation Lam Son 719. This invasion provided a dramatic object lesson illustrating three important points about the trail.

First, the fact that an attempt at ground interdiction was made at all reflects the difficulty of impeding the flow of men and supplies down the trail by air action alone.

Second, the stiff resistance with which the NVA met the invasion was an indication of the large value they attached to this supply line.



In Lam Son 719, South Vietnamese soldiers ran a captured NVA amphibious tank. This Soviet-built light tank mounted a 76-mm gun.

Third, the fact that the incursion, which reached as far west as Tchepone, did not significantly reduce the volume of supplies that the NVA was eventually able to move down the trail although the deliveries were no doubt delayed. The NVA's ability to cope with this problem was evidence of the effectiveness of the diffuse system of jungle paths and alternate roads.

Lam Son 719, to the great surprise of senior RLA commanders in MR IV, began with the South Vietnamese, supported by US air, quickly thrusting into southern Laos. It later developed that the RLA commanders in MR IV were about the only ones surprised by Lam Son 719; the foreign press had alluded to it on several occasions and SVN preparations must have been apparent to the North Vietnamese in advance since they were able to move units from North Vietnam to reinforce in the area west of the DMZ. The most significant thing about Lam Son 719, as far as the Lao were concerned, was that it confirmed their belief that the North Vietnamese trail structure was an American/South Vietnamese/North Vietnamese problem and that the principals involved did not regard the RLG position as germane to the issue. This attitude was unfortunate since it was possible that the Lao forces could have played a significant role in Lam Son 719. In retrospect, a RLA thrust, weak as it may have been, along Route 9 toward Chavane from MR III and a RLA threat to Saravane in MR IV may have succeeded in diverting sufficient North Vietnamese forces to have permitted South Vietnamese more success during Lam Son 719.

While Lam Son 719 was in progress, military activity in southern Laos tapered off, MR IV forces should have been regrouping, but this was not to be so; the respite offered by Lam Son 719 was not exploited as senior Lao officials in MR IV continued to view the trail problem as one of the North

Vietnamese versus the South Vietnamese and the Americans. The Lam Son 719 respite was interpreted, incorrectly, as a sign that the North Vietnamese had all they wanted in south Laos, and what the south Laos commanders were content to let them keep was relatively insignificant. They were still far from Pakse, the only key Lao city in MR IV. This interpretation was partially caused by a lack of knowledge of the objectives and up-to-date information on Lam Son 719 developments. The standard joke in MR IV was that the Lao received most of their information on the progress on Lam Son 719 from intercept of North Vietnamese communications while their "allies," the South Vietnamese and the Americans, kept their developments secret.

It is unfortunate that a senior, qualified US Army officer was not present in Vientiane to push for more involvement by the RLA. During this time, the Lao themselves were more concerned with developments in MR II and the threats to life in Vientiane than with the more strategic (in terms of the overall war in Indochina) activities in southern Laos. This was to be the case throughout the Laos war, with the southern Lao feeling like country cousins to the Lao elite in Vientiane who saw the threat in MR II as more directly affecting them. Maintaining the seat of government in Vientiane was undoubtedly a key objective of both the Lao Government and the US Government, however, in light of strategic developments, south Laos was crucial in both the survival of Cambodia and South Vietnam, a fact not fully recognized and accepted by the Lao government or by their American counterparts in Vientiane, much to the frustration of some of the southern Lao leadership.

Following the withdrawal of the ARVN in Lam Son 719, the NVA redoubled its efforts to expand and improve the trail structure. Lam Son 719 was a convincing lesson to the North Vietnamese leadership that this was the correct course of action. Further, the increasing Communist role in Cambodia was requiring larger quantities of supplies which could only be funneled through southern Laos. Recognizing the key role of south Laos, the North Vietnamese upgraded their combat units. The 968th Front became a division and the 9th, 19th and 29th Infantry Regiments were assigned to it with the objective of securing the entire Bolovens Plateau and pushing as far west as Khong Sedone.

While Lam Son 719 may have interrupted the Communist supply flow temporarily, it strengthened the North Vietnamese resolve to further expand in southern Laos and remove any possible threat to a constant flow of supplies. This resulted in significant losses to the RLG when the province capital of Khong Sedone and the key Bolovens Plateau town of Paksong were overrun by the North Vietnamese.

Although Lam Son 719 partially accomplished its objective by temporarily drying up the flow of supplies to the NVA forces in southern South Vietnam and Cambodia, it must be viewed with some doubt by the Lao, for shortly following Lam Son 719, the North Vietnamese significantly upgraded their combat capability in southern Laos, reverting to conventional warfare utilizing regular NVA combat units in regimental attacks supported by long range (122-mm and 130-mm field gun) artillery and, for the first time, armor units in attacks against Lao population centers near the Thai border (Khong Sedone). While it is not certain that Lam Son 719 caused the North Vietnamese leadership to decide on this strategy it certainly must have reinforced their favorable consideration of this course of action. Viewed purely from the stand point of the immediate security interests of the RLG, there were no benefits to Laos from Lam Son 719.

The year 1970 was thus the turning point in the nature of war in the Laos panhandle. Concurrent with the greatly increased demands placed on its logistical and replacement system by the expanded and intensified conventional combat in South Vietnam, the NVA faced serious threats to the continued operation of the Ho Chi Minh trail complex in the panhandle. And not only was the trail under constant attack by American air power, but access to South Vietnam by sea — that is, across the beaches of South Vietnam and through the Cambodian posts — was being denied by US-Vietnamese "Market Time" operations and by the new Cambodian government of Lon Nol. Consequently, to avoid as much US air interdiction as possible, to increase the number of available routes and storage areas in the panhandle, and to develop a greater capability to move supplies through Cambodia, the NVA pushed westward in the panhandle, seizing Attopeu and Saravane in the process. Then, in early 1971, the South Vietnamese attack at Tchepone gave even more urgent impetus to the NVA westward expansion. Conventional combat had come to the panhandle.

CHAPTER IV

The NVA Panhandle Offensives of 1971 and 1972

The ebb and flow of intense NVA activity along the Ho Chi Minh trail generally followed the pattern of the annual wet and dry monsoons that influenced the weather, and hence the trafficability of the roads and trails in the panhandle. As the dry monsoonal winds from China drove the moisture-laden clouds into the Gulf of Thailand, the tropical sun parched the landscape and the laterite roads became hard as concrete, although the dust churned up by the convoys could be seen for miles. It was during these relatively arid months that the NVA usually conducted its Laos offensives, only to withdraw eastward with the coming of the summer rains. But by 1970, this routine pattern was modified; various requirements and pressures combined to compel the NVA to attempt to make permanent its lodgements in the western panhandle.

As recounted earlier, Attopeu and Saravane fell to the NVA in early 1970. The RLA lacked the combat power to even attempt the recapture of Attopeu and the weak counterattack mounted against Saravane had failed. The Saravane population resisted NVA efforts to keep it in the town — the NVA wanted the people around as insurance against air attacks — and had fled. The NVA could not prevent the people from returning to their homes for load after load of their belongings which they carted and carried the 30 miles down Route 16 to Khong Sedone. The people even removed the corrugated metal roofing from their houses. Observing the weakness of NVA security in the abandoned town, Laos Military Region IV and Vientiane authorities began planning an operation to retake Saravane in the next dry season which would begin in late October and last into April.

Irregular Groupement Mobile 32 from Military Region III was selected for the task. Airlift would be provided by the USAF helicopters (CH-53s) from Nakhon Phanom, Thailand. GM 32 was landed on the Saravane airstrip in March 1971 without any NVA resistance. The NVA battalion was completely surprised and had to withdraw. GM 32 mopped-up around Saravane for three weeks before turning over the security mission to BV-41, the battalion that had been driven out by the NVA in 1970.

BV-41 didn't stay long in Saravane. The 39th NVA Regiment moved back to Saravane in April as the 1971 NVA offensive began and BV-41 had to pull back again to Khong Sedone.

In April 1971, the North Vietnamese began to push into the Bolovens Plateau. Although there were no major engagements, the Lao irregulars on the eastern Bolovens were slowly but surely being restricted in the areas where they could move without engaging the NVA forces. By the first of May, they were within the generally accepted zone of security of the village of Houei Kong, a long-time center for irregular forces activity as well as the center of the Montagnard population in MR IV. Although these Montagnard local forces had a good reputation, they were largely untested in combat. The leader, a Montagnard lieutenant appointed by General Phasouk, enjoyed close relations with the Americans as well as with Phasouk and had promised that "no Communist can enter and live" in his zone of responsibility. On 4 May, at approximately 0900 hours, the NVA began to probe the defense of Houei Kong and by 1100 hours, the village was completely abandoned by the RLA and Montagnard irregular forces. Only about 15 of the Montagnard forces withdrew with the lieutenant and the remainder surrendered immediately to the NVA and began assisting in rounding up the remaining irregular resistance. The entire Houei Kong complex fell without ever being assaulted.

At this time the MR IV commander, General Phasouk, was in the hospital for treatment of injuries received in an automobile accident and a totally inept officer, Brigadier General Kane, was in command. He concurred in the abandonment of Houei Kong without even making an effort to support the forces with air strikes and without advising the

Americans that it was even under attack until the withdrawal took place. A desultory effort to get the troops to go back into the defensive positions was unsuccessful; thus, the fall of the Bolovens Plateau began without a battle.

Paksong and Route 23

On 15 May 1971, the NVA attacked Infantry Battalion 20 at Paksong, in the heart of the Bolovens. The attack began at approximately 0500 hours with a mortar and artillery bombardment followed by infantry attacks, supported by armor. By 0700 hours, the battalion had dispersed and Paksong was lost. Scattered pockets of resistance remained for several hours but efforts to reinforce were only half-hearted and unsuccessful. At the time of the attack, BI 20 was commanded by Phasouk's other brother, Colonel Samrane. He was most famous for his ability to control the coffee and vegetable exports from Paksong and for his conduct of a profitable business with the Pathet Lao, supplying them with rice, gasoline and other needed supplies in return for coffee.

With the fall of Paksong, the real threat to Pakse was finally understood by the MR IV hierarchy as well as in Vientiane. Phasouk called upon General Khong, one of his subordinate generals, who had no specific duty at the time but who had formerly commanded guerrilla units, and told him to organize a task force to retake Paksong. General Khong established a command post and gathered some battalions but delayed making any move toward Paksong until the Vientiane headquarters, prodded by the Americans, lost patience with the inactivity and directed me to regain Paksong. I was given command of a task force consisting of three battalions, BV 41, BV 44 and one Neutralist battalion, BP 104.

The first advance toward Paksong failed when one of my battalion commanders, Lt. Colonel Bouathong, was killed by a short round of artillery and his battalion fell back in disarray. When the NVA discovered this, its forces moved another 10 kilometers west toward Pakse. I moved forward to take personal control of the disintegrating command and deployed two battalions by helicopter to meet the advancing NVA west of Paksong. This element of the task force was too light to stop the NVA



Troops of BV 44 Assemble in the Saravane Area

but it did slow the enemy advance and gave me a chance to reorganize the shattered formations along Route 23 and did buy some time for other Lao forces being assembled elsewhere in MR IV.

My command fought a delaying action and established defensive positions near kilometer 28 on Route 23, 28 kilometers east of Pakse. This was the only real defensible position between Pakse and Paksong and was a bloody battleground for the remainder of the war. So many Laos and North Vietnamese were killed in this area that it became a "haunted place" to the Lao.

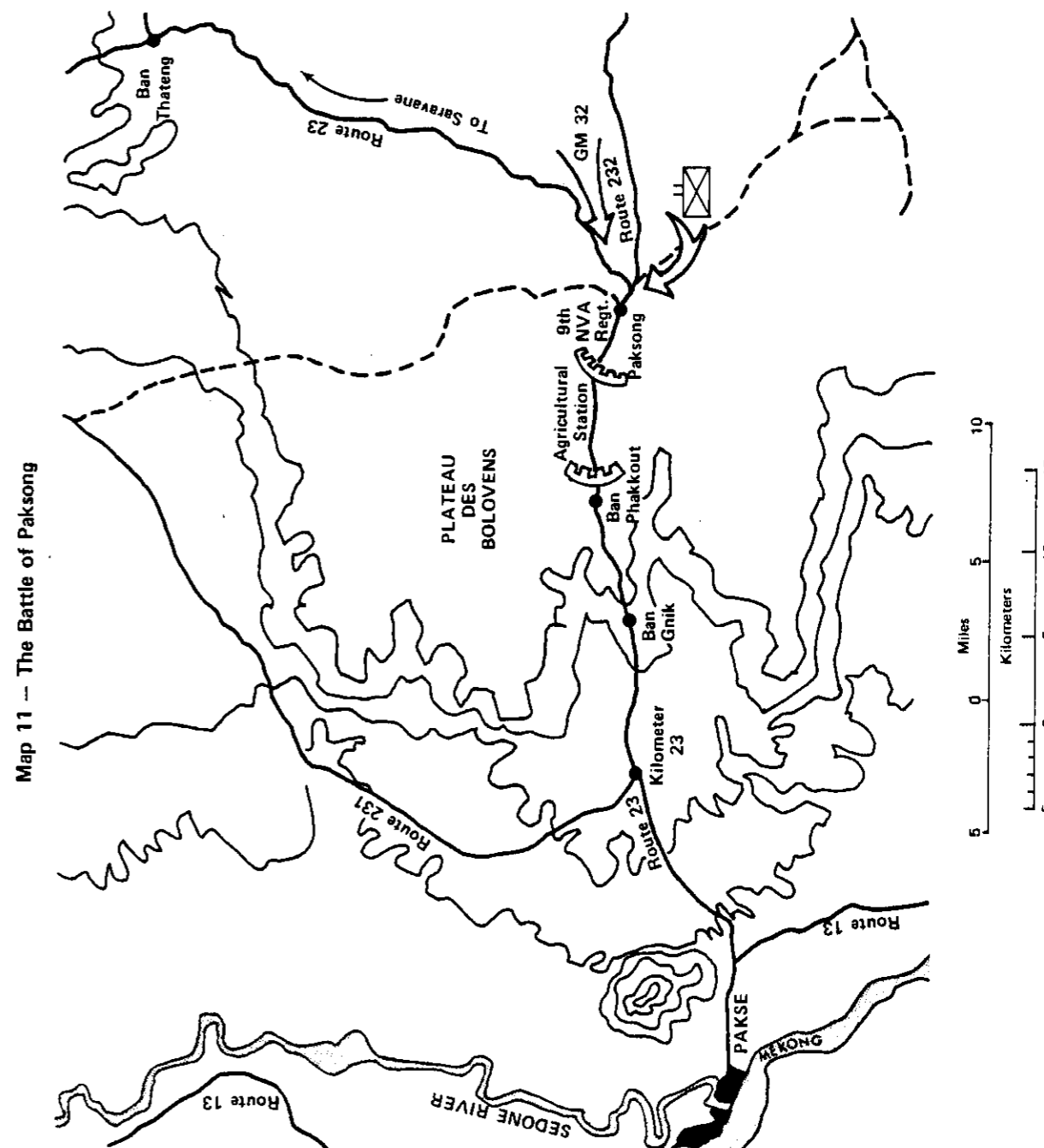
On the morning of 11 June, the positions were overrun and the Lao, broken into small groups, were evading to the west. Lao casualties were over 100 killed, an unknown number wounded and several hundred missing. The group with me knocked out a North Vietnamese PT-76. Clearly visible from the air, it provided the first concrete proof that North Vietnamese armor was indeed being employed in MR IV. Additionally, North Vietnamese units in columns of twos could be plainly seen on both sides of Route 23 moving westward. Aerial observers directed sortie after sortie directly onto the North Vietnamese closely bunched together and their casualties were high. The eight RLAF aircraft assigned to Pakse flew 88 sorties on 11 June, a record high for that small number of aircraft. Additionally, the U. S. Air Force joined in the attack of the NVA column. These air strikes can be credited with stopping the NVA and inflicted sufficient casualties to force the North Vietnamese to regroup; it was several weeks before they were in condition to continue their efforts against allied defensive positions along Route 23.

The Lao military structure in MR IV was almost totally destroyed in the series of battles between Paksong and kilometer 23. Seven RLA infantry battalions, two Neutralist battalions, and almost all of the irregular forces were so shattered that they had to be considered combat ineffective. It was then that the reorganization of the military structure in MR IV began. It is impossible to imagine more trying circumstances under which to begin attempting to rebuild the MR IV forces. Concurrent with the poor state of combat effectiveness there was great concern about the NVA capability and intentions to continue the attack toward Pakse.

On 1 July 1971 I became commander of MR IV and immediately began working on a plan to recapture Paksong. Because our reorganization was still incomplete in the region, Vientiane agreed to let us employ GM-32 from MR III. It was to be an airmobile operation with a ground link-up and the airlift would be provided by the USAF CH-53s from Nakhon Phanom. On 15 September, GM-32 poured from its USAF helicopters east of the Paksong road junction and seized the high ground north of the town. Meanwhile, BI-7 landed southeast of Paksong and attacked to seize the high ground south of the town. (Map 11) The airmobile assault completely surprised the 9th NVA Regiment, whose main defenses were along Route 23 west of Paksong, and these positions were being attacked by RLG Neutralist Battalions BP 104 and BC 207.

The NVA bunkers and fighting positions were well fortified, heavily manned, and sited in depth along Route 23 west of Paksong and the advancing Neutralist battalions met strong resistance. But cut-off from the rear by GM-32 and BI-7, and under heavy air and artillery attack, the NVA 9th Regiment had to pull out of its Paksong defenses and to avoid annihilation or capture, break into small groups and withdraw through the forest. In three day's time, we had control of the high ground and Route 23 into Paksong.

The success of this operation can be attributed to the surprise of the airmobile assault and to the aggressive attack of GM 32 in driving into Paksong causing the NVA defenses facing the Neutralist forces to collapse. It bought more time for the reorganization of the irregular forces in MR IV and in this respect, it was totally successful. Although Paksong was recaptured by the NVA after the withdrawal of GM 32, this effort required the North Vietnamese to expend more combat power and by the time the North Vietnamese were in position to again threaten Pakse, the irregular forces in MR IV were as ready as they were ever to become to halt the NVA drive and launch a counteroffensive.



Map 11 - The Battle of Paksong

Reorganization

As mentioned earlier, a complete reorganization of MR IV was underway in the summer of 1971. Where previously the irregular units had been employed in 50-man teams to harass the North Vietnamese, we in MR IV had decided that larger combat formations were needed to provide strike forces to deal with the large formations the NVA was employing with such success. Accordingly, authority had been received for the formation of two groupements mobile consisting of four battalions each with supporting light artillery. We traded ground for time. Fortunately, the NVA casualties in the campaign had been so high that the NVA was unable to exploit its success at Paksong with a strong advance to Pakse.

During the period July-October 1971, the irregular forces reorganization was completed. The first new irregular battalions began arriving at PS-18 in July 1971 for a four month training cycle which included basic individual, basic unit, advanced unit and field maneuvers as well as training in the employment of air and artillery. A major portion of the training was devoted to platoon, company and artillery exercises. Training in large scale airmobile air operations was also given. Although the soldiers after only four months of training were less than outstanding, they were able to hold their own for sustained periods, up to four months. Experience developed following their deployment indicated that after four months of combat, these soldiers had to be pulled from the field or risk total disintegration of the unit. This was amply demonstrated in late 1970 and early 1973 during the period of cease-fire negotiations when the irregulars were left in the field for extended periods. In one case, a GM began to disintegrate after four months but remained in the field for an additional two months. In the other case, the GM also began to fall apart after only 90 days in the field but managed to hold on for five months.

At the same time, a reorganization of the regular and Neutralists forces was also initiated although with considerably less success than with the irregulars. Also it was very difficult to find qualified commanders for the new regular GMs. Although the position was prestigious, none of the many colonels in MR IV wanted the position because of the risk of combat it entailed. Filling the battalion commander positions was even more difficult and eventually many of the younger officers got their chances to lead battalions in combat although they were not, in fact, senior enough to be battalion commanders. Nevertheless, in MR IV we did manage to organize two new regular GMs, 4001 and 4004, with regular and Neutralist battalions.

Complicating the reorganization was an unresponsive support system which never achieved the proficiency of the support system for the irregulars. The essential difference lay in the fact that the irregulars were supported by an American civilian agency, using American helicopters and airplanes, with Americans directly involved in the day-by-day operations of the system. On the other hand all categories of support for the regulars came through the U. S. Military Assistance Program. This support was provided at the national level and entered the RLA system there. The young RLA lacked the experienced logisticians, technicians, and transport to make the system work efficiently. Further complicating the reorganization was the ingrained custom in MR IV that certain battalions belonged to certain senior officers and could not be used without long negotiations with these officers.

The advantage of the irregulars was that they could be used anywhere in MR IV on short notice and that they were commanded by the best officers in MR IV, all volunteers, as were the soldiers in the battalions. Despite the many problems, two training sites were in full swing in the summer of 1971 with PS-18 training irregulars and PS-46 training the regulars.

Concurrent with the reorganization of the regular and irregular forces, a communications and command and control system had to be

developed and installed that could coordinate the many actions in MR IV in a coherent manner. (Chart 6) To accomplish this, a tactical operations center (TOC) was opened with trained tactical air controllers on duty 24 hours a day. The MR IV staff was reshuffled to provide a streamlined G-2/G-3 section operating side-by-side and the G-1/G-4 section combined under one support command. The activation of the TOC was to prove to be the most important staff facility added to the MR IV headquarters.

In establishing the TOC, it was necessary to build a communications system capable of communicating with all military units in MR IV. To accomplish this, a relay station was established on a tall mountain eight kilometers from Pakse. Initially, this station was manually operated with a team of radio operators permanently stationed there. Later, an automatic relay system was installed on the mountain, greatly facilitating communications. This facility proved invaluable in conducting the various operations throughout the region as well as enabling the MR IV staff to coordinate air support requirements day and night. The establishment of this facility alone can be credited with the sustained defense of Saravane and Paksong just prior to the cease-fire in 1973. Although it may be difficult to imagine in this day of instant communications, prior to the establishment of the TOC it was quite possible that an entire battalion would be overrun before any word of trouble reached MR IV. In several instances, the word filtered to MR IV headquarters through the civil communications system several hours later.

Saravane

In September 1971, the NVA 19th Regiment was occupying Saravane. Our new irregular GM 41 and GM 42 had completed their organization and training and we saw an opportunity to test them in combat against this regular NVA infantry regiment. We named our plan to retake Saravane "Operation Black Lion" and scheduled it to begin in mid-October.

On 16 October, GM 42 air-assaulted from USAF CH-53s west of Saravane and attacked toward the southeast, clashing immediately with elements of

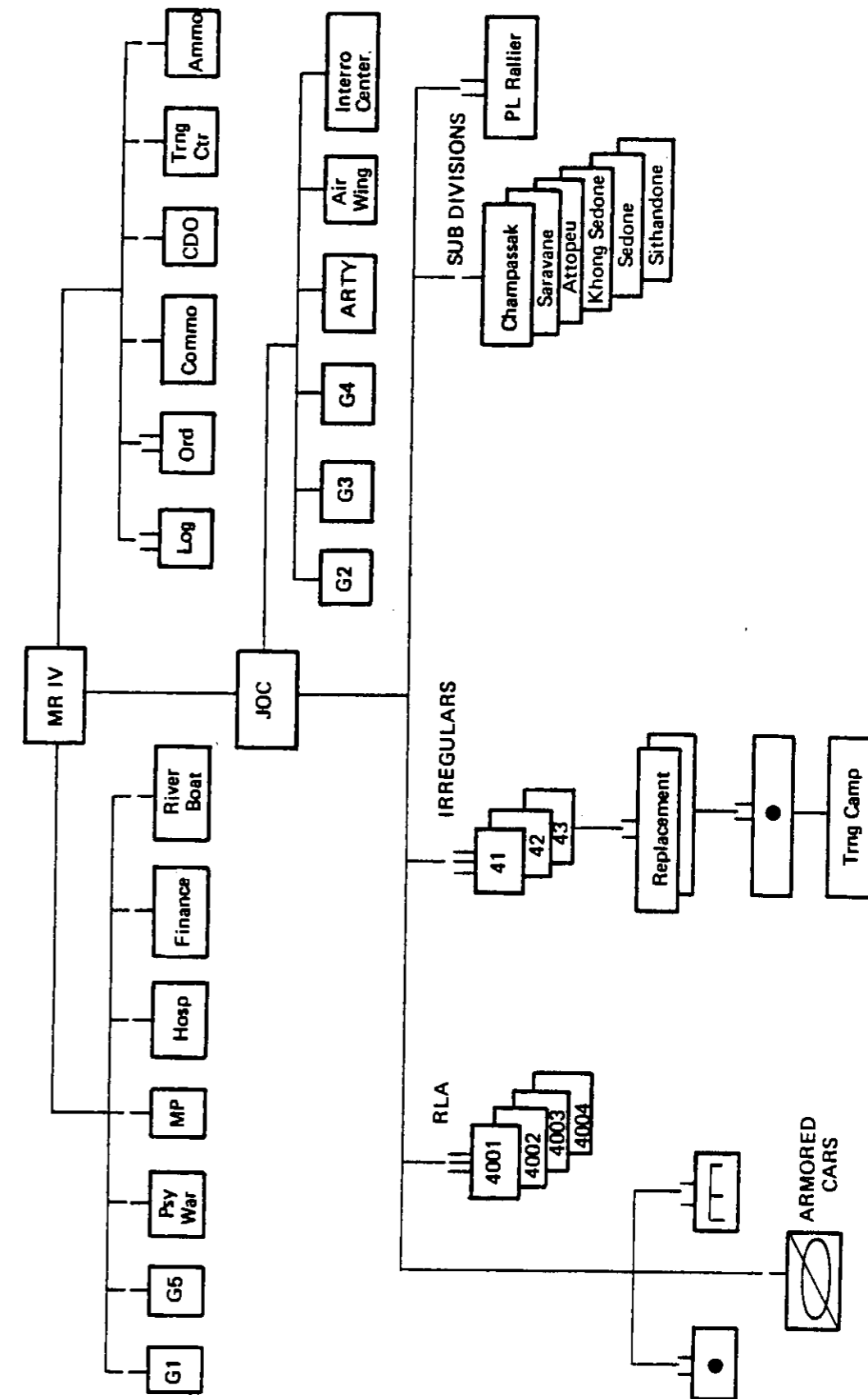


Chart 6 - Organization of Military Region IV in September 1971