

Invaders for Covert Operations in Laos

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Under the terms of the 1954 Geneva Accords, the Southeast Asian nation of Laos was supposed to remain neutral and all foreign forces were to leave the country. However, the country soon fell into chaos, with the Communist Pathet Lao, the Royalist forces of General Phoumi Nosavan, the neutralists under Prince Souvanna Phouma, and the Meo guerillas under Lieutenant Colonel Vang Pao all vying for control. The various factions soon became pawns of the Cold War superpowers--the Soviet Union providing aid to the Pathet Lao forces, and the United States supporting the Royalist and Meo forces. Large numbers of North Vietnamese troops had entered the country and were fighting on the Plain of Jars.

The United States government decided that there was a need to provide some sort of Laotian force to counter the Communists that did not have an obvious US connection, and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was given the task of setting up an air unit that would carry out covert operations in Southeast Asia. This came to be known as Project *Mill Pond*. In late 1960 and early 1961, a batch of B-26s were acquired from the pool of ex-USAF aircraft that had been held in storage at Davis Monthan AFB. The aircraft were "sanitized" so that their identity could not easily be traced, and they carried neither national markings nor serial numbers. Their pilots were recruited primarily from the USAF, but some Air America pilots (a CIA front organization) were used as well. The crews and planes were stationed at Takhli airbase in Thailand, and the crews were given commissions in the Royal Thai Air Force as cover.

The first strike had been scheduled for mid-April, but was called off at the last minute on orders from Washington, probably because of the Bay of Pigs disaster which had given covert operations like this one a bad name. The first actual flights did not take place until early May, most of the missions being armed reconnaissance. Only a few *Mill Pond* missions had been flown by the time that President Kennedy and Premier Khrushchev had reached an understanding that ended (at least for the moment) the crisis in Laos. A cease-fire was announced and an international conference was convened in Geneva, which eventually reaffirmed the independence of Laos and once again called for the removal of all foreign forces from Laos. A new coalition government headed by Souvanna Phouma took office in June of 1962.

The *Mill Pond* missions were discontinued, but the planes and crews remained on standby at Takhli, not leaving until the end of August.

In October, with the Geneva negotiations still going on but with the US government suspecting that the North Vietnamese were continuing to reinforce their positions in Laos, couple of RB-26Cs returned to Takhli. This time, the Invaders were flown by Air America crews under a project known as *Black Watch*. They flew a few reconnaissance missions over suspected North Vietnamese concentrations in Laos, with one of the planes being damaged by flak on November 2. The reconnaissance mission over Laos was taken over by a group of USAF RF-101 Voodoos deployed to Don Muang airport in Thailand, but the RB-26s remained at Takhli until the spring of 1962, when they were redeployed to South Vietnam.

Sources:

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