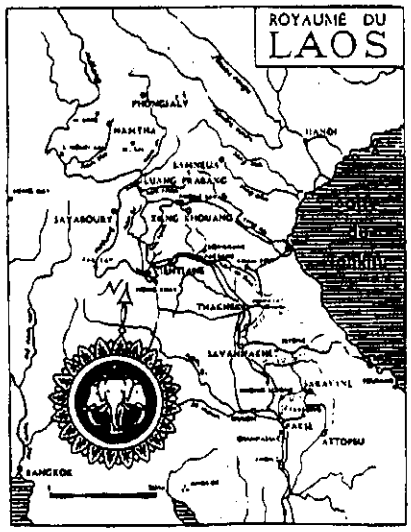
PROJECT Contemporary Historical Examination of Current Operations REPORT

Air War in Northern Laos
1 April - 30 November 1971

22 June 1973

HQ PACAF
Directorate of Operations Analysis
CHECO/CORONA Harvest Division

Prepared by:
Maj. William W. Lofgren
Maj. Richard R. Sexton
Project CHECO 7th AF, DOAC



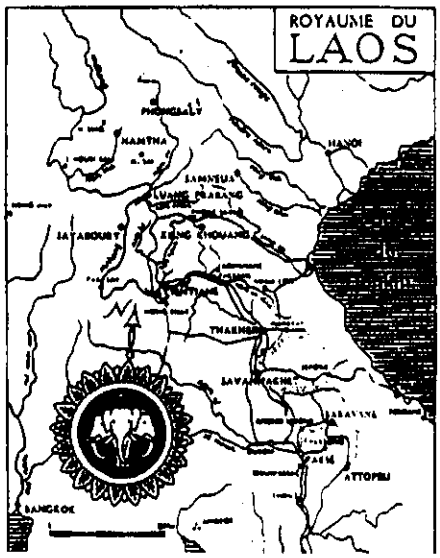
PROJECT Contemporary Historical Examination of Current Operations REPORT

Air War in Northern Laos
1 April - 30 November 1971

22 June 1973

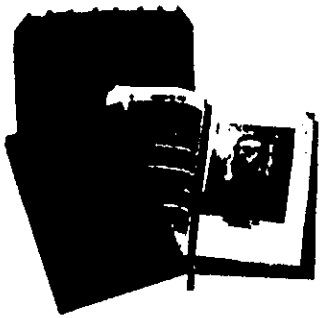
HQ PACAF
Directorate of Operations Analysis
CHECO/CORONA Harvest Division

Prepared by:
Maj. William W. Lofgren
Maj. Richard R. Sexton
Project CHECO 7th AF, DOAC



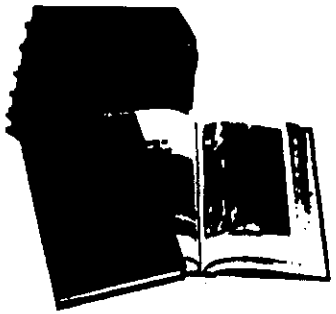
Air War in Northern Laos: 1 April - 30 November 1971
ISBN 0-923135-52-9

Reprinted by
Dalley Book Service
90 Kimball Lane
Christiansburg, VA 24073
United States of America
(703) 382-8949



Dalley Book Service

90 Kimball Lane
Christiansburg, Va. 24073
703-382-8949



Special Ordering Service: New Books | Search Service: Out-of-Print Books | Used Books: Bought and Sold

PRINTING NOTE

For reasons of "National Security", pages, 19, 20, 24, 25, 26, 27, 30, 31, 32, 33, 46, 47 and 73 remain classified.

George W. Dalley, President of Dalley Book Service

DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE
HEADQUARTERS PACIFIC AIR FORCES
APO SAN FRANCISCO 96553

PROJECT CHECO REPORTS

The counterinsurgency and unconventional warfare environment of Southeast Asia has resulted in USAF airpower being employed to meet a multitude of requirements. These varied applications have involved the full spectrum of USAF aerospace vehicles, support equipment, and manpower. As a result, operational data and experiences have accumulated which should be collected, documented, and analyzed for current and future impact upon USAF policies, concepts, and doctrine.

Fortunately, the value of collecting and documenting our SEA experiences was recognized at an early date. In 1962, Hq USAF directed CINCPACAF to establish an activity which would provide timely and analytical studies of USAF combat operations in SEA and would be primarily responsive to Air Staff requirements and direction.

Project CHECO, an acronym for Contemporary Historical Examination of Current Operations, was established to meet the Air Staff directive. Managed by Hq PACAF, with elements in Southeast Asia, Project CHECO provides a scholarly "on-going" historical examination, documentation, and reporting on USAF policies, concepts, and doctrine in PACOM. This CHECO report is part of the overall documentation and examination which is being accomplished. It is an authentic source for an assessment of the effectiveness of USAF airpower in PACOM when used in proper context. The reader must view the study in relation to the events and circumstances at the time of its preparation--recognizing that it was prepared on a contemporary basis which restricted perspective and that the author's research was limited to records available within his local headquarters area.

Robert E. Hiller

ROBERT E. HILLER
Director of Operations Analysis
DCS/Operations

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF FIGURES	ix
FOREWORD	x
CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION	1
Dual Nature of the War in Laos	2
Allocation of Resources	6
Organization for the Barrel Roll War	8
Planning for the Barrel Roll War	16
Barrel Roll Working Group	20
CHAPTER II. THE SITUATION	22
The Enemy Offensive Reaches Its Zenith	22
Plans for the 1971 Wet Season Offensive	29
Order of Battle	35
Historical/Political Constraints and Their Impact on the Military Situation	37
Enemy Organization	48
USAF Support	51
CHAPTER III. OPERATIONS	57
Military Region I	57
Military Region II	60
CHAPTER IV. STATUS AS OF 1 DECEMBER 1971	87
Military Region I: Enemy Strength/Capabilities	87
Military Region I: Friendly Strength/Capabilities	87
Military Region II: Enemy Strength/Capabilities	88
Military Region II: Friendly Strength/Capabilities	89
Military Region V: Enemy Strength/Capabilities	90
Military Region V: Friendly Strength/Capabilities	90
Tacair Sorties	91
RLAF Air Order of Battle	92
The Political-Military Interface	94
CHAPTER V. CONCLUSION	96
FOOTNOTES	101
GLOSSARY	111

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure No.			Page
1.	(C)	Map: Southeast Asia (SEA) Showing "Designated Operating Areas" of Laos	3
2.	(C)	Map: Barrel Roll	24
3.	(C)	Map: Plaine des Jarres (PDJ)	25
4.	(S)	Chart: Order of Battle	36
5.	(U)	Map: Pathet Lao Administrative Subdivisions - Laos.	50
6.	(S)	Chart: USAF Aircraft Deployment in SEA as of 31 July 1971	52
7.	(C)	Map: Military Region II	63
8.	(S)	Map: Plaine des Jarres - Southern Portion of MR II.	70

FOREWORD

(U) The Air War in Northern Laos is a continuing study which addresses USAF operations in that portion of Laos known as Barrel Roll. (See Figure 1.) The USAF role has primarily been to support the seasonal friendly campaigns. As the Wet Seasons began, the charismatic Meo war Lord, Maj Gen Vang Pao, traditionally drove inward in an attempt to capture the famed Plaine des Jarres area from Communist Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese troops. Alternatingly, Vang Pao's Dry Season campaigns were chiefly identified by his withdrawal from the Plaine to his headquarters at Long Tieng, his defense of the Long Tieng area, and his preparations for the next Wet Season offensive. This pattern manifested itself once again during the April to November 1971 Wet Season campaign which again saw this semi-annual see-saw battle for Barrel Roll territory.

(U) In organizing this study, the military regions in northern Laos were treated separately with a separate chronology for each area. This format was selected in preference to a strict chronological treatment of all of northern Laos as a whole because the regional variances of the 1971 Wet Season lent themselves to this approach. Likewise included in this study is a discussion of command and control relationships which, along with the various political constraints, greatly affected the role of USAF air power in supporting the Laotian allies.

(U) This study makes no effort to indict any government's political role in military victory or defeat. As the military instrument is employed to achieve political objectives, the military leader ignores political consequences only at his own peril. This fact is as significant in USAF Barrel Roll operations as it has been throughout the Southeast Asia conflict.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

(U) Superficially, the situation in April 1971 appeared to be much the same as it had in the two previous years. The enemy offensive had once again reached its zenith as the dry season came to an end. In northern Laos it had already been halted, and the enemy was slowly beginning to contract his lines. In the south, the enemy advance continued but with decreasing momentum. The situation was still serious, but the crisis had passed and it was time for the friendly forces to begin making plans for their own offensive.

(S) Several subtle but decisive changes had taken place, however, which were to significantly alter the normal yearly course of events. In Washington, the mood was one of withdrawal and disengagement. Any offensive operations which might appear to be dragging the United States deeper into the war were viewed with the greatest concern. In Southeast Asia itself, the USAF had drawn down to the point where its ability to support offensive operations in Laos, while conducting an interdiction campaign against the infiltration routes into South Vietnam, was severely limited. At the same time, the ability of the Laotians to mount an offensive--or even to maintain defensive positions without U.S. air support--was nonexistent. In contrast to this diminished allied strength, the North Vietnamese were stronger than ever. Prior to 1969 their main supply bases had been located in North Vietnam, and each offensive had to be preceded by a long logistics build-up. During the two succeeding years, however, they had been able to

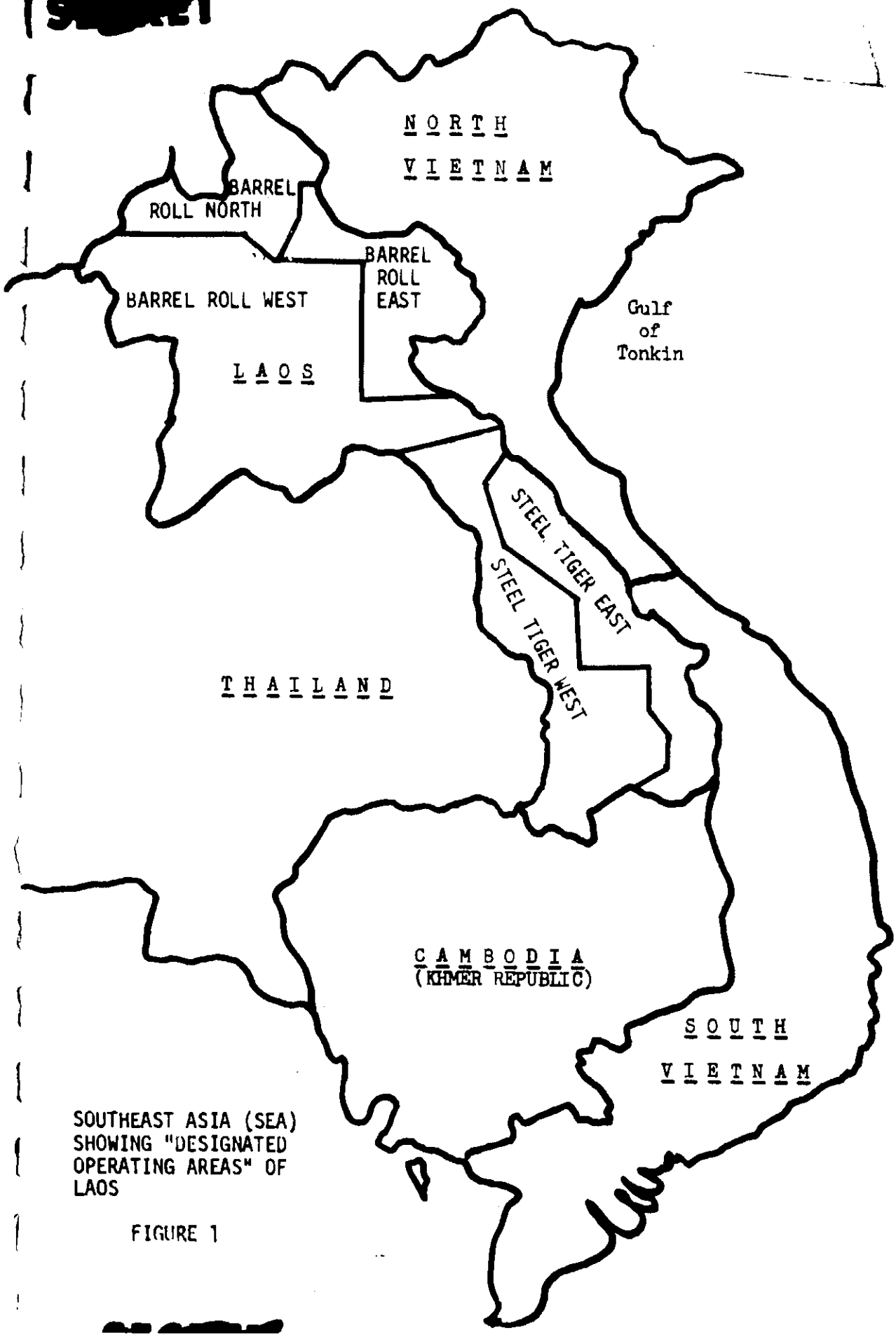
establish secure, well-defended depots inside Laos. With supplies from these depots, they were able to maintain much larger forces in Laos throughout the wet season.

(S) Under these circumstances, it was imperative that friendly efforts be fully coordinated if there was to be any hope of saving Laos. Unfortunately, there was no systematic procedure to achieve such coordination. The absence of such a procedure resulted from two principal factors. First, a sufficiently high priority was not assigned to operations in Barrel Roll. Second, there was no effective organizational structure for directing joint operations and no provision for joint planning to effectively use the available, limited resources.

(U) Nevertheless, air power continued to play a dominant role in the conflict and what successes were achieved were due primarily to the effectiveness of air power. What might have been achieved had the air resources been fully exploited remains a matter of speculation.

Dual Nature of the War in Laos

(TS) Any discussion of USAF operations in Laos must begin with an understanding of the dual nature of the war in Laos, a war which consisted of the struggle for Laos as well as a spill-over of the war in South Vietnam (SVN). The struggle for South Vietnam resulted from the attempt by North Vietnam to unify all of Vietnam under the Hanoi regime,[1] and involved Laotian territory (such as the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Steel Tiger East--see map, Figure 1) which was being used by the communists in their continuing effort to supply their troops in SVN. Primary responsibility for this facet



SOUTHEAST ASIA (SEA) SHOWING "DESIGNATED OPERATING AREAS" OF LAOS

FIGURE 1

of the war rested with the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) and its air component, Seventh Air Force. Operations were conducted in accordance with the conventional principles of a unified command, with USAF's primary role being to conduct an interdiction campaign against the Ho Chi Minh Trail in accordance with the stated objectives, which were to[2]

> . . . reduce the flow of men and materiel into [South Vietnam] . . . and to increase the cost to North Vietnam of continuing aggression and support of insurgencies in South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

(S) It is the other part of the war in Laos--the Barrel Roll war--that is the subject of this report. USAF participation in this struggle was primarily in the form of direct air support of indigenous ground forces. The Barrel Roll war stemmed from North Vietnam's long-term goal of establishing its hegemony over all of Southeast Asia.[3] By 1971 this war encompassed all of northern and western Laos (Barrel Roll and Steel Tiger West). Ostensibly, American interest in this phase of the conflict was to stabilize the situation along the limes of the 1962 Geneva Accords; it has been characterized as "the war of Laos," as opposed to "the war in Laos."[4] However, because of North Vietnamese aspirations, it might more accurately be called the war for Thailand. Inevitably, the two aspects of the war in Laos became intertwined, but in 1968 the U.S. Ambassador to Laos, William H. Sullivan, asserted, "We still must consider our interest in Laos . . . as the protection of the flank for Thailand."[5]

(TS) By Presidential directive, the Ambassador to Laos was responsible for the "overall direction, coordination and supervision" of U.S.

military operations in Laos.[6] However, the principal military force available to him--tactical air power (TACAIR)--was under the operational control of Seventh Air Force which, as the air component of MACV, was primarily concerned with the war for South Vietnam. Since operations in southeastern Laos (Steel Tiger East) were primarily related to the war for South Vietnam, the Ambassador delegated targeting authority in this area to Seventh Air Force,[7] and MACV in effect exercised control of military operations there. The Ambassador retained direct responsibility for the ground war in Barrel Roll and Steel Tiger West. Serving as the link between the Embassy and Seventh Air Force was the Deputy Commander, Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force (7/13AF).

(S) Thus, the nature of the war in Laos presented distinct political and military problems and required different applications of air power. On the one hand, there was the interdiction campaign under a conventional military organization. On the other hand, there was the direct air support of indigenous forces, conducted under the control of the Ambassador. Both campaigns, however, were waged with the same forces, which were limited in numbers and constrained by political and military considerations. In order to meet these multiple requirements with limited resources, the Air Force had developed a flexible system of centralized command and control which permitted rapid shifting of resources from one area to another as the situation dictated. As the war for South Vietnam escalated, however, it quickly overshadowed the war in Laos, and Seventh Air Force tended to view operations in Barrel Roll only in terms of

supporting the war in Vietnam. This emphasis on interdiction, and the lower priority assigned to Barrel Roll, prevented the Air Force from deriving full value from its flexible command and control system.

Allocation of Resources

(TS) The allocation of resources to the Barrel Roll area was a matter of continuing concern. In 1971, a political/financial decision limited U.S. air support for all of Southeast Asia to an average of 10,000 TACAIR (including Navy), 1,000 B-52, and 750 gunship sorties per month.[8] This represented a reduction of almost 50 percent from the previous year and further aggravated the allocation problem. This reduction was alleviated somewhat through a system of "banking" of sorties by allowing the Air Force to fly at a reduced rate during periods of lesser activity in order to "surge" during critical periods. Basically, it meant that USAF operations would be "resource limited."[9] Under these circumstances, Seventh Air Force recognized that it would not be able to meet all of the demands placed upon it and that priorities would have to be established. At the same time, command and control would have to be flexible and every available sortie would have to be used effectively.

(TS) Basic guidance and rationale for the allocation of air resources was contained in Seventh Air Force Operation Plan 730 (OPLAN 730), Southwest Monsoon Campaign Plan, 1971. This plan was based on the assumption that in the aftermath of Lam Son 719 (the South Vietnamese thrust into Laos January-March, 1971) the enemy would continue his resupply effort well into the wet season to replace the losses suffered during that campaign.

As a result it was felt that the enemy logistics system in Laos would be much more active than in previous years.[10] At the same time, Seventh Air Force believed that in northern and western Laos "it is probable that neither the enemy nor friendly forces will make any significant territorial gains beyond those made during the dry season."[11] Accordingly, OPLAN 730 established the following guidelines for sortie allocation: 70 percent to Steel Tiger, and 10 percent each to Barrel Roll, Cambodia, and Vietnam.[12] For Barrel Roll this meant a reduction of almost 50 percent, from 60 to approximately 32 sorties per day.

(S) During the course of the campaign, the basic assumptions of OPLAN 730 proved incorrect. For example, truck traffic in Steel Tiger East dropped rapidly from a high of almost 2,500 trucks per day to an average of only 11 trucks per day during the latter part of the campaign.[13] At the same time, materiel that was in the pipeline was placed in storage and most of the road maintenance crews returned to North Vietnam. As truck traffic diminished, the brunt of the Air Force effort shifted to interdiction points (IDPs) and storage areas. Under the combined effects of bombing and rain, the roads and IDPs were quickly reduced to quagmires. The campaign against storage areas at first produced satisfactory results: air strikes produced an average of 1.6 secondary fires or explosions per sortie in April.[14] However, as the more lucrative targets were exhausted and weather hampered visual bombing, bomb damage assessments (BDA) fell to a low of 0.2 secondary fires or explosions per sortie in July.[15]

(S) In the meantime, military activity in Barrel Roll and Steel Tiger West continued at a rapid pace. For one thing, friendly forces launched major ground offensives in Military Regions (MR) II and IV, but encountered unexpectedly stiff resistance and so required considerable air support. Second, the roads in northern and western Laos--especially in the Plaine des Jarres (PDJ) and Bolovens Plateau--were less affected by the rains than those in the mountainous areas to the east. Consequently, the enemy was able to continue his resupply efforts in these areas for a longer period and to resume them at an earlier date than in Steel Tiger East.[16] At the same time, the enemy's storage facilities were not as dispersed or as well defended as in the eastern LOCs. As a result, the few sorties (typically six to 10 per day) which were directed against hard targets averaged three to five secondary explosions or fires per sortie.[17] Despite this relatively high level of activity and the excellent BDA, no major adjustments in sortie allocation were made. This situation was frustrating to aircrews and planners alike since many of them considered it "splashing mud on trees" while more important and lucrative targets were not being struck due to "shortage of sortie availability."[18]

Organization for the Barrel Roll War

(S) The second major matter of concern was in the organizational structure for the conduct of the Barrel Roll war. Instead of one single agency, there were three principal agencies involved in the support of military operations in Laos: the U.S. Embassy in Vientiane, Seventh Air Force, and Seventh/Thirteenth Air Force. In addition, the Military Assistance Command,

Thailand (MACTHAI), the American Embassy in Bangkok, and the Deputy Chief, Joint U.S. Military Advisory Group, Thailand (DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI) were also involved to a lesser degree. This division of responsibility and resources made coordination difficult and joint planning virtually impossible.

(TS) Since the 1962 Geneva Convention prohibited the stationing of foreign troops in Laos, there was no unified command for the conduct of the Barrel Roll war. The former Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) was redesignated DEPCHJUSGMAGTHAI and moved to Bangkok where it continued to coordinate the Military Assistance Program (MAP) from outside Laos. Similarly, MACTHAI was limited to the improvement and modernization of the Royal Thai Government (RTG) forces. Responsibility for military operations in Laos passed to the U.S. Ambassador to Laos. Reporting directly to the Ambassador was the Air Attache (AIRA). To coordinate USAF and other U.S. military activities with the Royal Laotian Government (RLG) forces, the Ambassador was assisted by four principal agencies: the Offices of the Air and Army Attaches, CAS,* and the Requirements Officer of the U.S. Agency for International Development. First, there was the staff of the Air Attache, legally limited to seven personnel. However, they were augmented by 11 people from the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA). Since this total staff of 18 was too small to provide the professional advice required by the Ambassador and to coordinate USAF-Royal Laotian Air Force (RLAF) operations, th Office of the U.S. Air Attache (OUSAIRA) was augmented by an additional 51 personnel from Det 9, 1131 Special Activities Squadron, Headquarters

*See pp. 11-12 for an explanation and discussion of CAS.

Command. (These personnel were assigned on a one year PCS basis to perform normal staff and support functions.)[19] Coordination of air-ground operations was achieved through the operation of five Air Operation Centers (AOCs) collocated with each of the five RLG military regional headquarters. These AOCs were manned by 21 personnel on six months TDY from the USAF Special Operations Force at Eglin AFB, Florida, under the "Palace Dog" program. Actual control of airstrikes in support of Laotian ground forces was the responsibility of 21 Raven Forward Air Controllers (FACs) (and Lao/Thai Forward Air Guides). The Raven FACs were assigned to Detachment 1, 56 Special Operations Wing (Det 1, 56 SOW), and were sent on six months TDY to Laos where they served under the operational control of AIRA. The Forward Air Guides (FAGs) were indigenous English-speaking* personnel who were given six days of training in air-ground procedures at Udorn RTAFB, and then were primarily assigned to each of Major General Vang Pao's CAS-supported Lao "Irregular" battalions.[20] An additional 18 maintenance men from Det 1, 56 SOW were also sent to Laos on six months TDY to assist the RLAF in maintaining MAP aircraft. Finally, three observers from the 10th Weather Squadron were assigned on six months TDY to Vientiane, thus giving OUSAIRA a total of 132 personnel. While in Laos, all of these people wore civilian clothes, and were addressed simply as "Mister." Their personal activities were severely restricted.[21]

(S) Even with this augmentation, however, OUSAIRA was inadequately manned to properly staff the full range of operations which it was called

*Other non-English speaking FAGs were assigned to regular Laotian battalions to control strikes by the RLAF.

upon to perform. This limitation and the lack of any formal relationship with 7/13AF often created problems in the coordination of air plans. In his End of Tour Report, Major General Andrew J. Evans, Jr., Deputy Commander, 7/13AF, noted this problem:[22]

> The senior military advisor in Laos is the Air Attache, who has no official connection whatsoever with the Deputy Commander, 7/13AF. The opportunities for conflict are obvious. Although the overwhelming experience and expertise in military air operations lies in the staffs of 7/13AF and 7AF Headquarters there are no checks on the Air Attache except those which can be exercised by the Deputy Commander, 7/13AF through his personal relationship with the US Ambassador. With the Ambassador's approval and support, AIRA plans and air support requests were channeled through the 7/13AF for coordination and approval, prior to forwarding to 7AF.

(S) In addition, the Raven and Palace Dog programs placed aircraft solely under AIRA control. This caused occasional friction between AIRA and 7/13AF. From time to time, attempts had been made to put the Ravens back under USAF control, but all such efforts had been successfully resisted by AIRA in accordance with the wishes of the Ambassador.[23]

(TS) The second agency under the Ambassador was the Office of the U.S. Army Attache (OUSARMA). Authorized a staff of 10 people, this was a larger staff than OUSAIRA. These personnel performed functions similar to those of their OUSAIRA counterparts. They also provided advisors to each of the military regional commanders.[24]

(S) The third organization within the Embassy was the Controlled American Source (CAS), the cover name for the Central Intelligence Agency

(CIA) in Laos. In addition to its normal intelligence collection functions, CAS organized, trained, and equipped para-military "Irregular" forces for the RLG. CAS also maintained a staff to plan and direct the employment of these forces and coordinate their operations with the military regional commanders. Although composed largely of former military men, it was in no sense a professional military staff. It was especially weak in air operations, and depended largely on OUSAIRA and 7/13AF for these functions.[25] Unfortunately, neither of the latter organizations was able to fully provide this service, and this created additional problems of coordination.[26] As General Evans noted:

> There is no official connection between the air element represented by 7AF tactical air and CAS ground elements. A Memorandum of Understanding regarding procedures for coordination between 7/13AF and CAS staffs was executed at the beginning of this reporting period, and has been functioning reasonably well. The opportunities for conflict here, however, are also obvious, particularly where inadequate coordination leads to less than optimum air support, and when CAS officials find it prudent to blame air support for their own inadequacies or failures.

(S) The fourth organization concerned with military operations in Laos was the Requirements Office (RO). When the MAAG moved to Bangkok, the Requirements Office was established within the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to handle the military assistance program inside Laos. The RO was responsible for compiling a "shopping list" from AIRA, ARMA, and CAS and then for acquiring the materiel from DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI and supervising its distributions within Laos.[27]

(TS) Distribution was provided by the Airlift Support Section of the Embassy, which coordinated the operations of Embassy-assigned and contract aircraft. Generally, Air America and Continental Air Service provided the actual airlift. These resources were frequently inadequate and were augmented by USAF aircraft, especially the helicopters of the 21st Special Operations Squadron (21st SOS), controlled directly by the Deputy Commander, 7/13AF, and scheduled by his Special Activities Section (DOZ).[28]

(S) Although all plans for military operations in Laos had to be approved by the Ambassador, his approval did not guarantee their full implementation. All requests for USAF support (except for the 21st SOS) had to be made to 7AF, where they were weighed against all other requirements. By 1971 a complex but workable structure had evolved for the allocation of these resources in Southeast Asia. The Commander, 7AF had operational control of all USAF resources in Southeast Asia; however, all USAF units in Thailand were assigned administratively and logistically to 13AF. The position of Deputy Commander, 7/13AF was established to resolve any interface problems which might result from this arrangement, and, at the same time, to serve as the coordinating link between 7AF and the Embassy in Vientiane.[29]

(S) The Deputy Commander, 7/13AF neither established policy nor controlled the activities of USAF units in Thailand except as specifically delegated by the Commanders of the two parent Air Forces. As Deputy to the 13AF Commander, he advised 13AF on all administrative and logistics

matters pertaining to Thai-based units and relayed and supervised 13AF instructions to the subordinate units. Serving simultaneously as Deputy to the 7AF Commander, he advised 7AF on operational matters relating to USAF operations in Thailand.[30]

(S) Due to the proximity of 7/13AF (located at Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base) to Embassy personnel in Vientiane and to the war in northern Laos, 7/13AF was primarily concerned with operations in Barrel Roll and Steel Tiger West. In practice, its advice was limited to operations in these areas.[31]

(S) As part of the overall phasedown in SEA, on 29 May 1971 the 7/13AF Headquarters was reduced to 88 people and the 7/13AF Tactical Air Control Center (TACC) was closed.[32] Since none of the functions of 7/13AF were eliminated in this reorganization, the principal effect was simply to increase the workload on the remaining personnel. The loss of the TACC also deprived the Deputy Commander, 7/13AF of a central source of real time information and communications for monitoring operations in the Barrel Roll war. In an effort to offset these losses, provisions were made for the Tactical Unit Operations Center (TUOC) of the 432d Tactical Reconnaissance Wing (432 TRW) to assume a limited Command Post function for 7/13AF, but this plan was never fully implemented. Additional staff assistance was provided by the Commanders of the 1974 Communications Group, 621st Tactical Control Squadron and 10th Weather Squadron, who served simultaneously as Directors of Communications, Air Defense, and Weather, respectively. A Staff Judge Advocate and a small liaison office in Bangkok completed the 7/13AF structure.[33]

(S) On 1 July 1971, Major General DeWitt Searles replaced General Evans as Deputy Commander, 7/13AF, and a month later General John Lavelle replaced General Lucius Clay as 7AF Commander. During his tour, General Evans had developed a firm set of relationships with the Ambassador in Vientiane, G. McMurtrie Godley, and with General Clay. Overall, his relations with General Clay were quite good and he exercised considerable influence over the conduct of the war in northern Laos.[34] He had also coalesced his staff so that it reflected his own personality and operating methods. Although improvements were made in the relations between 7/13AF and the Embassy, significant areas of difference remained with CAS and OUSAIRA, especially in the areas of planning and coordination.

(S) General Searles promptly identified the unique relationship that he as 7/13AF Deputy Commander would be required to maintain with 7AF, 13AF, the Ambassador, CAS, and OUSAIRA. As he perceived the situation, his role would depend upon the confidence and rapport that he could establish with these agencies. His staff was responsive to his views and adept at translating ideas into concrete proposals acceptable to the Embassy and 7AF.

(C) General Searles also had to establish a good working relationship with his new boss, General Lavelle. Unlike General Clay, General Lavelle chose to exercise much more direct control over the Barrel Roll war and consequently reduced the freedom of action of his Deputy. Since the 7AF staff lacked the intimate familiarity of the 7/13AF people with the situation in Barrel Roll, thorough coordination became more important than ever.

(S) As General Evans had taken steps to improve relationships with the Embassy, General Searles continued to build upon this foundation. His approach in this regard reflected his own assessment of the role of Deputy Commander. As General Searles saw the situation, his principal functions were to focus 7AF attention on the Barrel Roll war and to ensure that the Ambassador received all the air support that he required. It was his policy to accept CAS/AIRA plans--even when he had personal reservations as to their feasibility--and translate their requirements into specific proposals which would be acceptable to 7AF. He also sought to establish a level of personal confidence with the Ambassador through frequent personal contact. One of the primary vehicles for this was the Ambassador's weekly staff meeting, held in Vientiane. The Deputy Commander, 7/13AF, had a standing invitation to attend these meetings. Just as his predecessor General Evans had done, General Searles made a point of attending these meetings whenever possible. (Often this meant postponing other activities and arranging special transportation to Vientiane.) At these meetings, he was able to talk informally with the Ambassador and his staff and engage in an open exchange of views. Such an exchange was especially important since there was no formal relationship between the Ambassador and Deputy Commander and no procedure for joint planning.

35

Planning for the Barrel Roll War

(TS) Since there was no unified command for the conduct of military operations in Laos, there was no joint planning in the accepted sense of the concept. The Ambassador, in consultation with his country team

and the RLG, developed the overall political and military objectives and parameters. The Ambassador also had to give final approval to all large scale plans before they could be implemented. CAS, which for all intents and purposes controlled the ground war, developed a ground plan of operation with occasional inputs from ARMA and AIRA. For "security reasons," neither 7AF nor 7/13AF was included in this initial planning. Thus, the ground package was developed without the benefit of a realistic appraisal of what air support would be required and whether it would be available. Instead, CAS placed almost unlimited confidence in the Ambassador's ability to get the necessary air support. Within limits, this confidence was usually justified. Since the Ambassador was responsible for the overall conduct of military operations in Laos, he was in effect a theater commander. Even though he had no U.S. military forces directly under his command, he did have the option, which he exercised on occasion, of going directly to the Commander in Chief, Pacific Command (CINCPAC), the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), or the State Department to bring pressure on 7AF to provide the necessary resources.[36]

(S) When a CAS/Embassy plan had been developed and air support requirements established, the plan was supposed to be passed via AIRA to 7/13AF, where an air support package was prepared for submission to 7AF. Since 7AF was concerned with making maximum effective use of its limited resources, the degree of support was often dependent upon the completeness and timeliness of the 7/13AF proposal. However, several factors hampered 7/13AF in developing a comprehensive proposal. First

Note

For reasons of "National Security," this page remains classified.

Note

For reasons of "National Security," this page remains classified.

dangerous time delay between planning and execution. Second, it did not really address the issue of joint planning at all; indeed, it created a chain of command which completely bypassed 7AF.

Barrel Roll Working Group

(S) Since there was no procedure for joint planning on a formal basis, mutual confidence and rapport on an informal level was absolutely essential if the system was to work at all. The prime source for this was the Barrel Roll Working Group, composed of representatives from the staffs of CAS, AIRA, 7/13AF, and 7AF. This group, which at first met at Tan Son Nhut and later at Udorn, discussed the overall level of activity, requirements, priorities, and available resources for the coming month. Although specific plans were not discussed and decisions were not binding upon any of the participants, the meetings did provide a common frame of reference for individual planning. From these meetings, 7/13AF developed a typical daily frag request for the following month, which was forwarded to 7AF for use in their own planning. The actual frag varied almost daily as requirements and available resources changed, but the monthly proposal at least served as a point of departure.[42] The Working Group meetings were supplemented by a Barrel Roll Conference at the end of each month. Members of the Working Group met with representatives of the various wings to review the monthly proposal and to present problems and suggestions for consideration and possible resolution by the conferees. Although these meetings were a useful supplement to, they were not a substitute for, joint planning.

(S) The absence of such planning may have been an unavoidable result of the organizational structure for the Barrel Roll war, but it placed the Air Force in a purely reactive role for which it was ill suited. General Evans previously had observed:[43]

> As long as the U.S. Ambassador has overall responsibility for military actions in Laos there seems little likelihood that significant improvements can be made in existing working relationships between 7/13AF, CAS and AIRA, the three principal U.S. agencies coordinating military operations in Laos. However, the leveling influence of the Deputy Commander, 7/13AF is essential and is considered to have contributed significantly to whatever success was achieved in military operations in Laos during this reporting period.

CHAPTER II

THE SITUATION

The Enemy Offensive Reaches Its Zenith (See Map, Figure 2.)

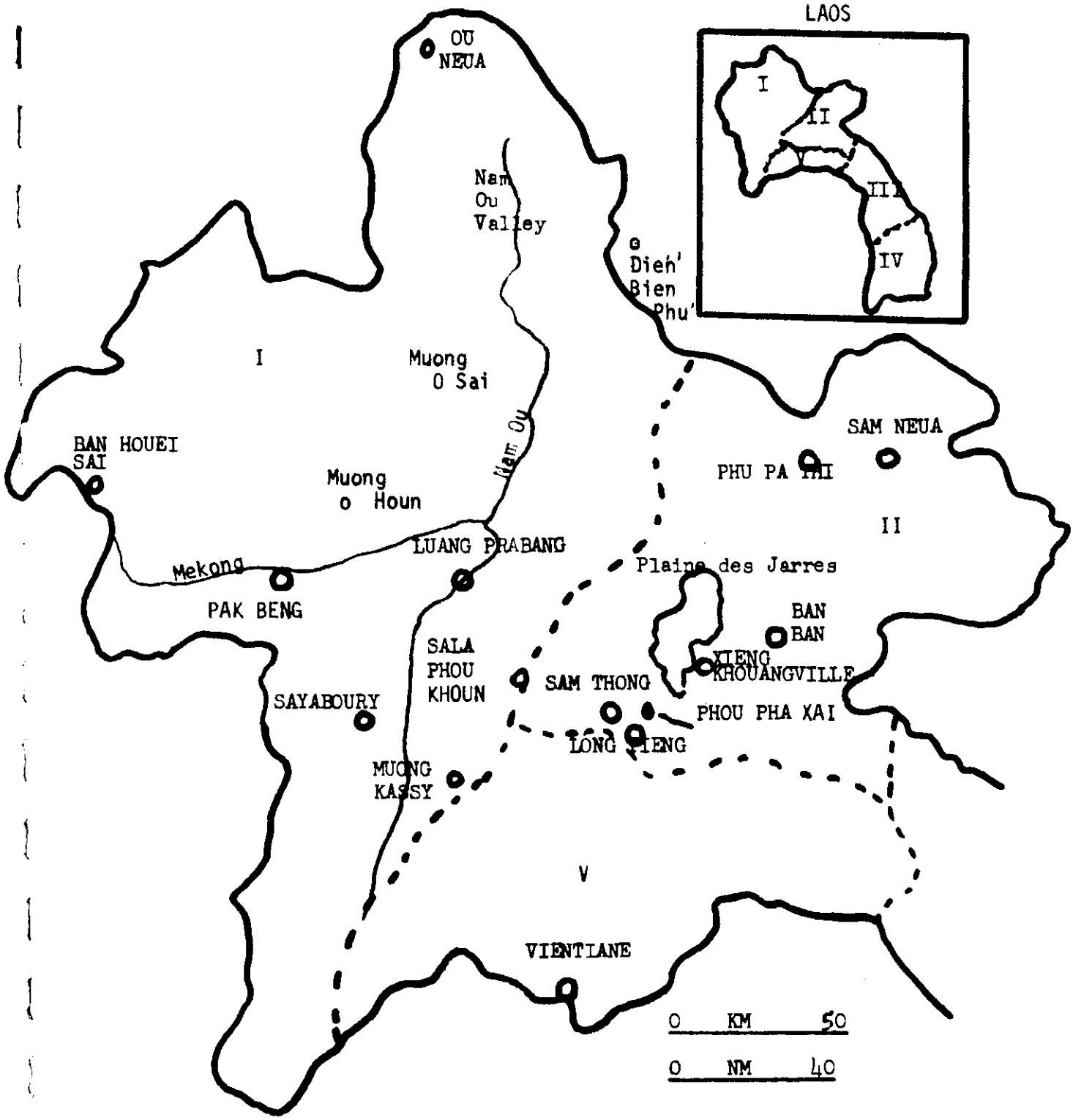
(TS) In the northern-most Military Region (MR I), the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) 335th Regiment and the Pathet Lao (PL) 409th Battalion (Bn) had driven to within three kilometers of the royal capital of Luang Prabang before being halted.[44] By 1 April 1971, they had already begun to withdraw from this exposed position leaving only a light screening force about seven kilometers north of the capital while the main force withdrew to fortified positions 30 kilometers north of the city. In the meantime, the NVA had been busy developing and stocking a series of supply depots in the upper Nam Ou valley. This area traditionally had been an NVA/PL sanctuary, and the enemy was taking advantage of this to develop bases from which he would be able to resume his offensive at an early date.[45] An Embassy message of 29 July commented:

> NVA supply lines along the Nam Ou valley remain secure in enemy hands and have not been seriously disrupted. Transportation activities appear to be assuming considerable attention which suggests that logistical related functions will remain a major objective during the remainder of the rainy season.

Farther to the west, the PL 408th Bn had succeeded in eliminating almost all of the friendly outposts on the north and west bank of the Mekong River between Luang Prabang and Ban Houei Sai. Smaller units were operating across the Mekong in Sayaboury Province, where they were in contact with the Thai Communist Terrorists (CT).

(S) To the north, some 15,000 Chinese were completing a road network linking China with Route 19 extending from Dien Bien Phu to Muong Sai. From there, the Chinese had pushed their road down the Nam Beng valley to a point just south of Muong Houn and had surveying traces all the way to Pak Beng on the Mekong. This road, aimed straight at Thailand's Nan and Chiang Rai Provinces, was causing increased concern among Royal Thai Government (RTG) officials since these two provinces were experiencing the highest levels of CT activity. The Chinese had also begun work on spur roads leading toward Luang Prabang. The entire road net was heavily defended; along these routes the enemy had deployed nearly 400 antiaircraft artillery (AAA) guns, of which 150 were 57/85mm and six were 100mm.[46] These guns were supported by four acquisition and 26 fire control radars. Prior to 1970, regular civilian overflights of the road had been unopposed, but in November 1970 an Air Laos C-47 had been hit near Muong Houn. Thereafter, heavy AAA fire was directed against any aircraft which came near the road.

(S) To the east of Luang Prabang, MR II, containing the vital PDJ/Long Tieng area, had been the scene of the heaviest fighting. Some 10,000 to 12,000 enemy troops from two NVA divisions had driven Vang Pao and his Meo Irregulars back into Long Tieng during the 1970-1971 dry season and then held positions along Skyline Ridge overlooking the Meo stronghold. (See map, Figure 3.) The enemy had been halted there by a combination of intense aerial bombardment and the timely arrival of reinforcements from other military regions, including 12 Thai Irregular battalions and a Thai artillery battalion.[47] Although the thrust had been blunted, the enemy still held



BARREL ROLL

FIGURE 2

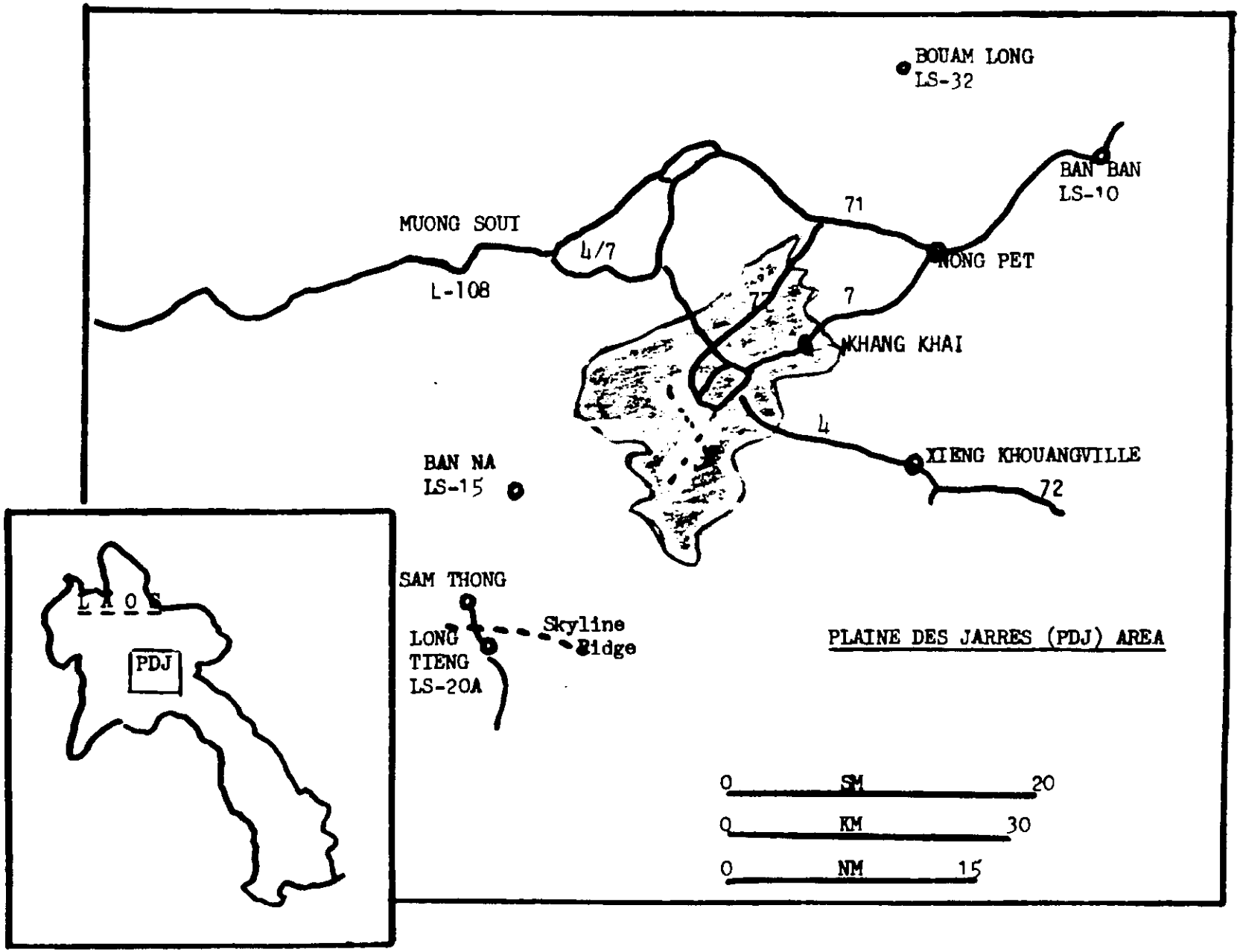

BOUAM LONG
LS-32
BAN BAN
LS-10
71
MUONG SOUI
4/7
L-108
NONG PET
7
KHANG KHAI
4
XIENG KHOUANGVILLE
72
BAN NA
LS-15
SAM THONG
Skyline
Ridge
LONG
TIENG
LS-20A
LAOS
PDJ
PLAINE DES JARRES (PDJ) AREA
0 SM 20
0 KM 30
0 NM 15

FIGURE 3

PDJ

Note

For reasons of "National Security," this page remains classified.

Note

For reasons of "National Security," this page remains classified.

latter force rested and reorganized, leaving just three battalions to hold the town. However, as the Lam Son and Desert Rat operations receded, the weather remained fairly good, and the enemy moved to fill the vacuum. On 2 May, they took Muong Phalane and pushed on to Dong Hene, which was abandoned 17 May. The friendly forces continued to fall back to the outskirts of Seno where the timely arrival of Thai Irregulars, hastily transferred from MR II, finally stiffened the line.[51]

(S) The situation in southern Laos (MR IV) was much the same. Following a thrust by friendly forces into the enemy-held portions of the eastern Bolovens Plateau, the enemy had counter-attacked and driven the RLG forces back into Paksong. Despite a vigorous defense, the town fell on 16 May. Following an abortive counter-attack, the friendly forces abandoned the plateau completely and fell back to Pakse. For about the next two months the situation remained stable. During this time the enemy began withdrawing forces to the Toumlane Valley, leaving only a few other scattered units (including the crack NVA 9th Regiment) on the Bolovens.

(S) Despite the vigorous resistance that the government forces had offered, the loss of this area in each of two consecutive years led to the replacement in late May 1971 of Maj Gen Phasouk, the Regional commander, with Colonel (later Brigadier General) Soutchay, who had established his reputation in MR I. Due to his family connections, General Phasouk was promoted to the largely ceremonial post of Chief of Staff of the Royal Army, but the action did show the government's concern for the area and General Soutchay was under no illusions as to what was expected of him.[52]

(S) Only around the administrative capital of Vientiane in MR V had action been light. There, some 14,000 friendly forces controlled the Nam Ngum Valley, while approximately 1,000 PL controlled the hills to the north and west.[53]

Plans for the 1971 Wet Season Offensive

(S) Having stopped the enemy drive by mid-April 1971, U.S. and Laotian officials were faced with the question of what further action they should take. Conventional military logic seemed to call for an immediate counter-offensive. However, the conflict in Laos rarely followed the lines of classic military strategy, and its course was often determined by the larger political issues involved.

(TS) In Washington, the American policy of disengagement and reducing casualties dictated that there be no major efforts to retake lost territory. This view was reflected in a MACV Concept Paper of 20 August 1970.[54] Although this document recognized that American objectives in Laos were "to maintain a neutral buffer state in Laos between Thailand and North Vietnam/China" and that "the enemy has the capability to take over all of Laos and Cambodia, should he desire to do so," it tended to put greater significance on the loss of Cambodia than of Laos.[55]

> Loss of Cambodia would make the population centers in southern Thailand, around Bangkok, most vulnerable to NVA/VC [Viet Cong] infiltration, terrorism and subversion. The NVA/VC would also have an almost clear path to attack Bangkok causing either the fall of Thailand or Thai disengagement from RVN [Republic of Vietnam] and Laos, and withdrawal from support of U.S. aims in SEAsia. The loss of Laos on the other

Note

For reasons of "National Security," this page remains classified.

Note

For reasons of "National Security," this page remains classified.

Note

For reasons of "National Security," this page remains classified.

Note

For reasons of "National Security," this page remains classified.

> As in the past years, RLAF and US air support will continue to play a significant role in Lao Government efforts to withstand North Vietnamese pressure. However, in the months ahead, US air support will be on the decline, as of 1 July reductions in the level of USAF sorties throughout Indo China mean that northern Laos can count on no more than 25 to 30 strike sorties per day. Consequently, the RLAF will be forced to carry a greater share of the air support burden. Steps have already been taken to increase the RLAF sortie rate through the acquisition of more aircraft and a comparable increase in pilot training quotas. This increase in the RLAF's strike capability will be developed on an incremental basis and will not be completed until we enter the forthcoming dry season. During the current wet season campaign RLAF will maintain the capability of flying up to 3,000 sorties per month. Already in July a combination of bad weather and reduced USAF capabilities has resulted in more Lao than USAF sorties throughout Laos on at least one occasion.
>
> Regardless of the increased RLAF capability, the loss of US air support cannot be adequately compensated for on a sortie-by-sortie basis. US Tacair provides capabilities beyond those attainable by the RLAF. Foremost are the ordinance load capabilities both in weight and type, time on target, survivability in high threat areas, responsiveness, range and speed, and command and control. These are important considerations relative to support of MR II operations and also affect the effectiveness of air support available for planned operations in southern Laos during the current period.

(S) Under these circumstances, it was imperative that air/ground operations be closely coordinated to insure the maximum effectiveness of air power. The Embassy believed that coordination could be best achieved by "dedicating" the sorties to the Raven FACs and allowing them to select the targets and effect air/ground coordination. However,

dedicating sorties was a violation of the Air Force doctrine of centralized command and control, since it effectively took those sorties out of the commander's control and further reduced the Air Force to a purely reactive role. Understandably, 7AF was reluctant to issue a "blank check" for a war over which it had no control. The Embassy never fully appreciated 7AF's position and hence made no provisions for joint planning to insure adequate and effective air support. This situation placed 7/13AF in a difficult position in its liaison role. Under General Evans it tended to lean toward the 7AF viewpoint, while under General Searles the Embassy viewpoint was normally supported.

Order of Battle

(TS) The RLG Armed Forces, which would have to bear the brunt of any military action, totaled approximately 95,000 men. (See Figure 4.) This force was composed principally of the 37,000 man Forces Armee Royal (FAR)/Forces Armee Neutralist (FAN), 33,000 Irregular, and 2,500 Royal Laotian Air Force (RLAF) plus additional support troops.[67*] Regular forces were organized into battalions of six companies, with an authorized strength of 666 men per battalion. In practice, however, assigned strength varied between 525 and 600. Irregular forces were organized into battalions of three companies with an authorized strength of 325. (Smaller, independent units had also been organized). A MACV estimate of RLG forces concluded:[68]

*Sources cited conflict in their estimates of troop strength. Numbers given here and in Figure 4 must be regarded as approximations.

The Laotian forces suffer from inadequate training and education, dependence on foreign assistance to train and maintain forces, lack of will to fight and lack of logistic capability for sustained operations. These forces are content to occupy company or battalion size defensive positions.

Although there is a program to train and upgrade six battalions annually, no expansion and little overall improvement in offensive combat effectiveness can be expected prior to October 1972 or later.

FIGURE 4

ORDER OF BATTLE

	FAR/FAN	IRREGULAR	TOTAL	NVA/PL
MR I	7,700	5,000	12,700	17,000
MR II	2,000	16,000	18,000	21,000
MR III	7,500	5,000	12,500	8,000
MR IV	5,800	7,000	12,800	11,000
MR V	14,000	0	14,000	1,000
TOTAL	37,000*	33,000	70,000*	58,000**

*Not shown are an additional 22,000 service and support troops, 2500 RLAF, and 500 Navy.

**This figure does not include 45,000 NVA engaged along the LOCs of Steel Tiger East nor 15,000 Chinese in MR I.

SOURCES: (S) CAS Enemy Order of Battle, 15 May 1971

(C) ARMA Order of Battle, Friendly Forces, Laos, 25 May 1971

(S) 7/13 Intelligence Briefings, 12 September 1971

(S) BRWG Minutes, April-October 1971

(S) JANAF Summaries, April-October 1971

[redacted]

In fairness to the Laotians, However, it should be pointed out that the 95,000 man armed force represented four percent of the total population at a time when the U.S. had less than one and a half percent of its population under arms. In addition, 75 percent of the Laotian national budget was devoted to military expenditure.[69]

Historical/Political Constraints and Their Impact on the Military Situation

(S) The Laotians were basically a peaceful people who were content to live in harmony with their neighbors. However, in the turmoil of post World War II international politics and decolonization, they had been drawn into a war which they neither wanted nor understood and whose overall course they were powerless to influence. In addition, two decades of constant warfare had disrupted the fragile social and economic fabric of the nation. Nevertheless, after a slow and shaky start, the Laotians had begun to make some notable improvements in the last few years.

(S) Partly because Laos was an artificial creation of the French, one of the fundamental problems facing the Laotian Armed Forces stemmed from the fact that, historically, family and regional ties had been stronger than any sense of nationalism. The population of 2.5 million included only 1.5 million Lao (while another 7.15 million Lao lived in Thailand). Even when Laos became nominally independent in 1953, these factors prevented the development of a true national government. The coups of the early 1960s and the 1962 establishment of the tripartite government--with its subsequent collapse--simply emphasized the factionalized nature of Lao society and of its military forces. Within each of the five military

regions, the regional commander was most likely to be from one of the prominent local families, and he ruled almost as a feudal prince. The situation was further complicated by the existence of a FAN as well as a FAR commander in each region. Each commander ran his recruiting program and paid his own troops. Since each commander was allocated money on the basis of his troop strength, there was considerable padding of rolls, kickbacks, and diversion of funds; thus, the actual pay of the soldiers varied considerably from region to region.[70]

(S) Basic and small-unit training were also conducted within each region, and the quality of this training varied widely due to a general lack of facilities, trained instructors, and uniform standards of performance.[71] Some large-unit training was conducted in Thailand, where the recruits were organized into companies, battalions, and mobile groups. However, each battalion or group was composed of soldiers from a single military region--and often from a specific district or town. Upon completion of training, they were returned to their own region where the local commander resisted any attempt to use them outside his own area. Although the system of out-country training did permit standardization and supervision for large-unit training, it was costly and complicated to move units into and out of Thailand and it did nothing to develop a sense of national unity among the Armed Forces.[72]

(S) Under the threat of complete North Vietnamese domination, especially after the 1969 and 1970 campaigns, the RLG finally began to take steps to break down the parochial regionalism. Prior to 1970,

Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma also simultaneously held the posts of Minister of Defense and Minister of Foreign Affairs. Since the duties of the Prime Minister's office required his full attention, the military was left without a civilian voice in cabinet level discussions. Even the Minister of Foreign Affairs had a "delegate" or deputy, who was the de facto head of the department and cabinet representative. On 20 May 1970, to correct this situation, Souvanna appointed Sisouk na Champassak as his "delegate" for the Ministry of Defense.[73] Sisouk provided the strong personal leadership required and, with a group of reform-minded officers, he began a major overhaul of the Armed Forces.

(S) One of his first moves, taken in August, was to reorganize the FAR General Staff, streamlining administrative procedures and bringing the FAN directly under the control of the General Staff. At the same time, the General Staff was moved into a new permanent headquarters collocated with the Ministry of Defense. Thus, the General Staff and the Ministry of Defense could be in constant contact and lend mutual support to one another in dealings with the regional commanders.[74] Together, these moves represented a significant victory for the nationalist-minded reformers over regional interests, and thereafter the national military leadership was able to act more decisively in times of crisis.

(S) The first test came in February 1971 with the NVA attack on Long Tieng. In this crisis, the General Staff prepared a plan to assemble a large relief force from the other military regions and dispatch it to MR II. Representatives from the General Staff were to accompany this force

and assist in planning its deployment. However, MR II Commander Vang Pao, while he wanted the reinforcements, would not permit any FAR interference in his operations because he felt FAR leadership was incompetent and unsympathetic to his Meo people. For their part, the FAR were unwilling to turn over their units to be "decimated" as a result of what they felt was poor staff work on the part of Vang Pao and his CAS advisors.[75] As a result of these considerations, the regular contingent of the relief force dispatched to Long Tieng consisted of two FAN battalions from MR V. These troops, with Irregular reinforcements from other areas, helped to stem the tide.

(S) A more successful test of the General Staff approach came in March, when FAR units were shifted from MR III to MR V to stop the NVA drive on Luang Prabang. A further display of national unity occurred following the loss of the Bolovens Plateau when Sisouk--himself a southerner--replaced General Phasouk with a northerner, General Soutchay.

(S) However, it became clear from these operations that simply "lending" the forces of one military region to another was not the answer. What was needed was a national reserve force directly responsive to the General Staff. An early attempt to create such a force had floundered in 1970, but in March 1971 the program was revived and renamed the National Strike Force (NSF). Initially, it was composed of five battalions, and was gradually built up during the wet season; however, it was not ready to go into action until the 1971 dry season campaign.

(S) Another move to break down regionalism occurred when the National Training Center (NTC) opened at Phou Khao Khouai in February

1971.[76] This center, located 30 miles from Vientiane, was designed to provide both basic and large-unit training. However, the initial training cycle was interrupted by the crises of the late spring, when every available man was rushed to the front to stem the enemy advance. As the wet season brought a reduction in the level of combat activity, training was resumed; however, the effectiveness of the NTC could not be measured until the following dry season.

(S) In spite of these reforms, many basic problems remained unsolved, and Laos was running out of both time and manpower. For one thing, regional and family interests continued to override national interests, and many politicians from the cities of the Mekong Valley were more concerned with "business as usual" than with difficulties being faced by their countrymen fighting a few miles away.[77] A second problem was that after 20 years of warfare Laos was simply running out of men for its military forces. In the absence of conscription, the military had to depend upon other inducements, and military compensation was not likely to attract many young men. The base pay of a recruit ($8.00 per month) was less than that received by a convict in jail ($9.00 per month).[78] For the recruit, however, even this amount was uncertain, since there was no central accounting and finance system. It was small wonder then that the men would supplement their income through "moonlighting" or various illegal activities. An extensive study undertaken by ARMA in 1969 proposed a number of improvements, but no action was forthcoming.[79] The military also had little to offer in other respects.[80] An ARMA report noted: