

[REDACTED]

CHAPTER I

THE BOLOVENS CAMPAIGN: PLANS

[REDACTED] Shortly after the loss of the Bolovens in May 1971, Laotian Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma ordered government forces to retake the area, and on 9 June a counter-attack was launched against the enemy. Known as Operation Phiboonpol, the friendly offensive lasted only two days, and ended with the friendly forces in disarray.

[REDACTED] The United States Ambassador to Laos, G. McMurtrie Godley, felt that, aside from purely operational considerations, the recapture of the Plateau was necessary if the RLG hoped to successfully force the enemy to come to the bargaining table to negotiate a compromise peace settlement. The Ambassador instructed his Controlled American Source (CAS) elements to plan, in conjunction with the Laotian general staff, a campaign which would successfully bring the Bolovens back under RLG control. With the wet season impeding enemy resupply efforts, it was believed that RLG forces would have the advantage and be able to conduct a successful counter-offensive. Officials also believed that by driving hard, government troops could establish strong defensive positions at forward locations which would make additional enemy gains during the next dry season much more difficult.

[REDACTED] The code name for the battle plan emerging from this joint planning activity was Operation Sayasila. In brief, the plan specified an all-RLG ground operation with the Royal Laotian Air Force (RLAF) providing the necessary air support. Principal objectives of the plan were: (1)

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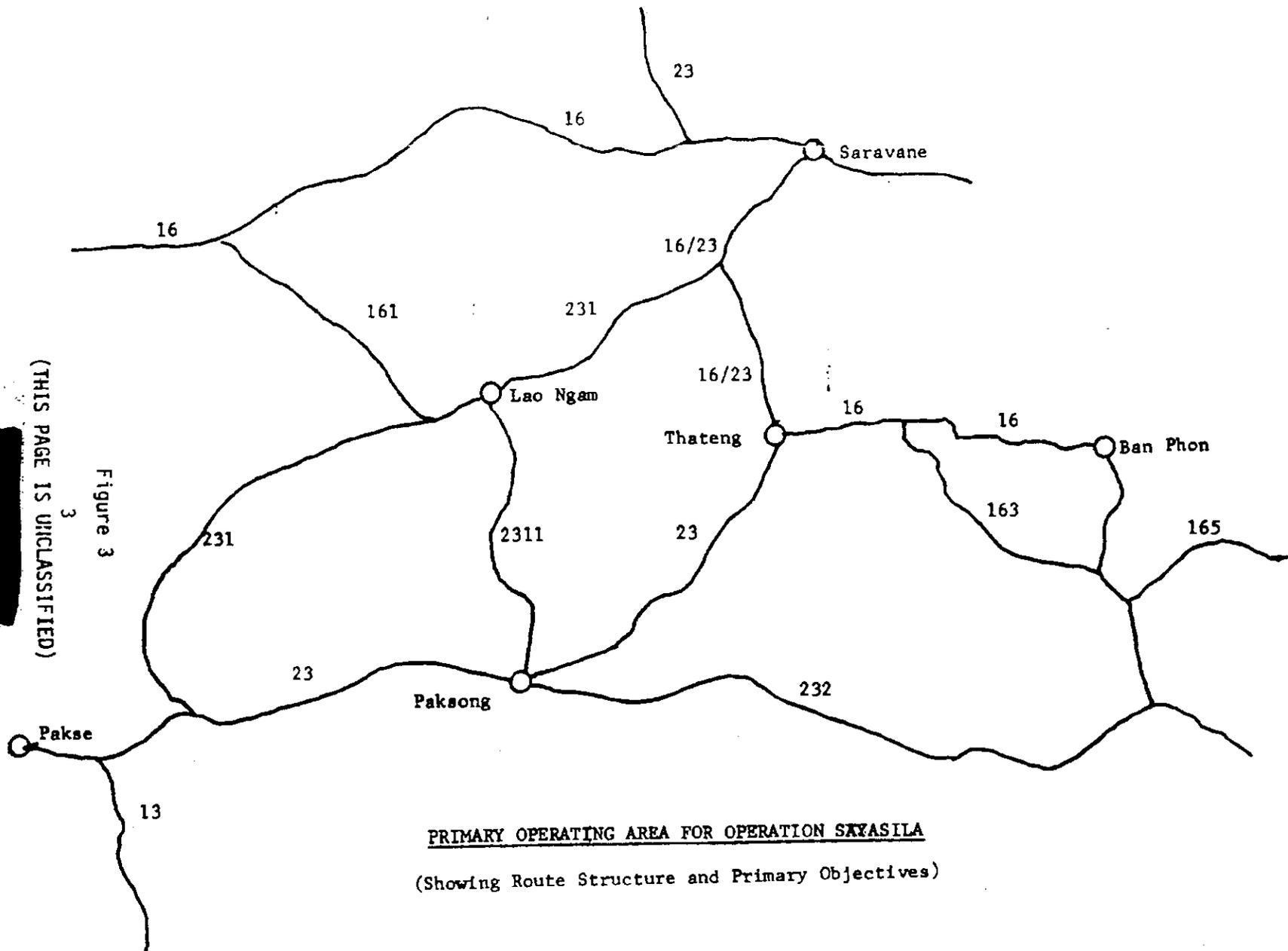
capture and hold the provincial capital of Saravane for a short period of time; (2) interdict Route 16/23 west of Saravane; (3) destroy the enemy logistics base south of the Se Don (Xe Don) River and north of Lao Ngam; and (4) recapture Paksong and clear Route 23 west and north of town. (See Figure 3.) The operation was to begin at the end of July.

Operation Sayasila was to be conducted in two phases. In Phase I (to be completed the first day) Saravane and its airstrip were to be secured. This would divert the enemy's attention from the Lao Ngam/Paksong sector, and, by bringing the provincial capital under RLG control, would be a psychological boost for the government. Phase II, scheduled to begin on the second day, was to be an all-out effort to secure Route 23 and the town of Paksong with its surrounding high ground.

During the final planning for the operation, campaign organizers re-evaluated the decision that all air support would be provided by the RLAF, and three days before the operation was to begin belatedly requested United States air support. The petition for United States assistance came as a result of an analysis of the RLAF capability and enemy strength. The Air Attache (AIRA) in Vientiane was to arrange for U.S. tactical air support for the duration of the campaign (then estimated at 30 days), and he requested 12 sorties of fighters per day. A division of the air support effort for Military Region (MR) IV was established for RLAF and USAF aircraft. RLAF T-28s would be employed mainly in a direct air support role and RLAF AC-47s would provide primary night support in all areas throughout

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Figure 3



PRIMARY OPERATING AREA FOR OPERATION SXYASILA

(Showing Route Structure and Primary Objectives)



the campaign, while U.S. TACAIR would be employed against anti-aircraft artillery (AAA), troops in contact (TIC), known storage areas, and targets of opportunity during daylight hours. U.S. gunship support would not be fragged, but would be provided on a divert basis throughout the operation. Airlift of supplies and troops would be conducted jointly by the RLAF, civilian contractor (Air America), and USAF CH-3 and CH-53 helicopters controlled by 7/13 Air Force.



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CHAPTER II
OPERATION SAYASILA

Phase I - Saravane

[REDACTED] Elements from the three primary government fighting organizations in Laos--the American-financed irregular guerrilla forces, regular Laotian rightist forces known as the Forces Armees Royale (FAR), and regular neutralist forces designated as the Forces Armees Neutralist (FAN)--¹⁰ were joined for Operation Sayasila. On 28 July 1971, Phase I began. Irregular troops had massed at an airstrip near Ban Noutlamphong (WC8833*), more familiarly known as Papa (for Pakse) Site Number 47 (PS-47). (See Figure 4.) Early that morning, helicopters began shuttling the irregulars to a helicopter landing zone (HLZ) approximately two kilometers south of Saravana [Lima Site (LS)-44, XC5237]. Although intelligence reports indicated that the North Vietnamese were building troop strength in the area, friendly forces entering the provincial capital of Saravane found the town deserted.

[REDACTED] At 0940 hours, the RLG flag was raised over the control tower at the airstrip, and shortly thereafter irregulars occupied Saravane, bringing the city under government control. By 1200 hours, friendly forces had set up a command post and assigned battalion defensive positions northeast, west, and southwest of the town. Although American Forward Air Controllers (FACs) (using the call sign RAVEN) provided air surveillance during the

*Coordinates in the Universal Transverse Mercator (UTM) Grid System.

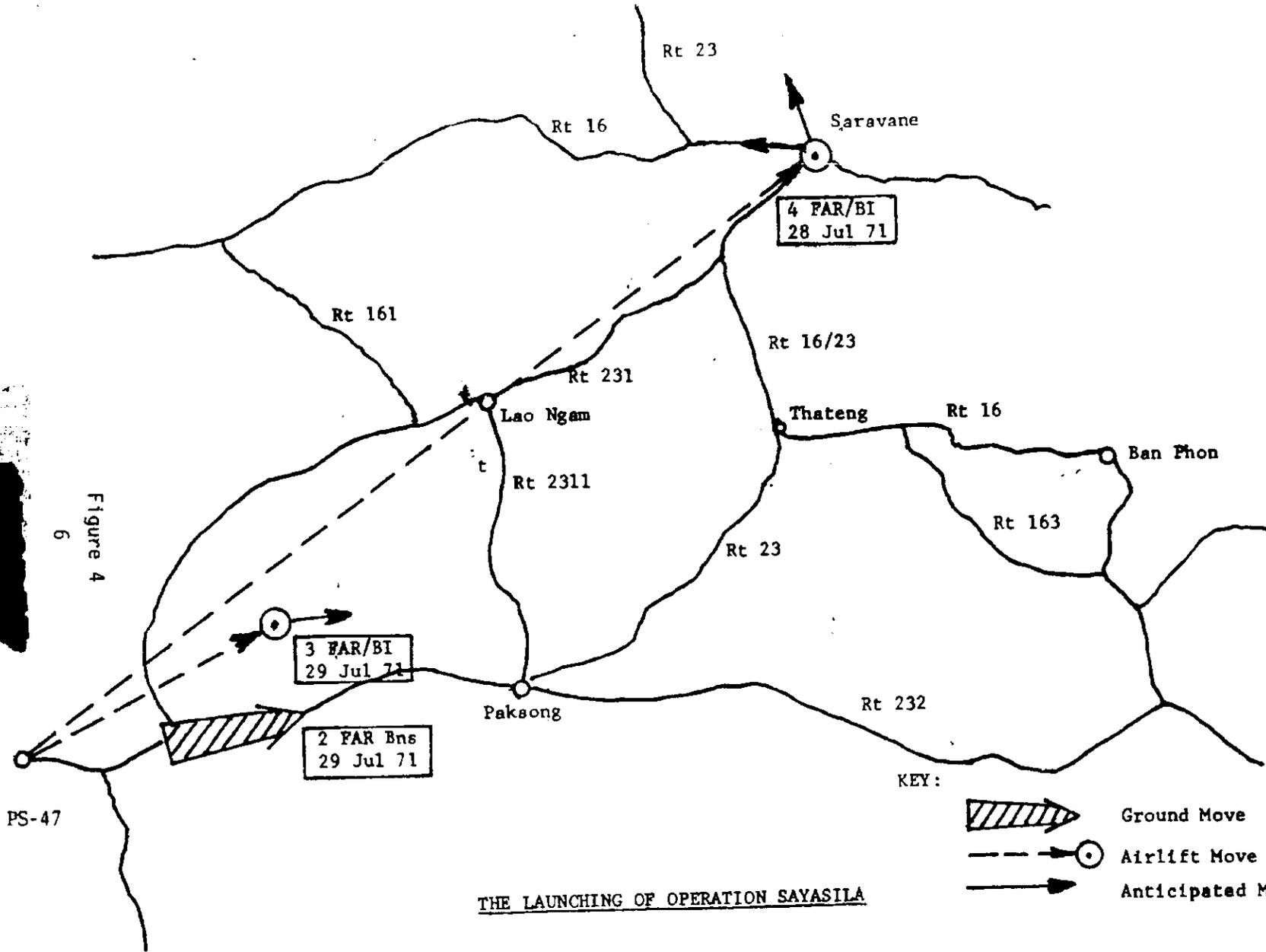


Figure 4
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THE LAUNCHING OF OPERATION SAYASILA

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infiltration and occupation, they directed no TACAIR strikes because of the lack of lucrative targets.

(S) On the afternoon of 30 July, Sisouk Na Champassak (Lao Government Defense Deputy), General Bounpone Makthepharak (FAR Commander-in-Chief), General Phasouk Somly (FAR Chief of Staff), and General Sourith Don Sasorith (RLAF Commander) visited Saravane to officially integrate the area into RLG control, thereby boosting the morale of the RLG forces.¹¹

(S) Little significant combat activity occurred in the Saravane sector during the months of August and September. Contacts with the enemy were limited to small skirmishes with light casualties. Friendly units were dispatched from Saravane on search-and-destroy missions, the largest contingent being a four-battalion irregular task force sent to Lao Ngam where the only significant enemy-initiated activity during this two-month period occurred when the NVA conducted attacks by fire (ABF) against friendlies throughout the nights of 4 and 5 September. Government forces were supported by RLAF AC-47 gunships and later by USAF AC-119 gunships. Air support for the friendlies resulted in 80 enemy troops killed by air (KBA), as confirmed by a count conducted by the Forward Air Guide (FAG) in the area.¹² During the daylight hours, USAF and RLAF TACAIR destroyed enemy bunker complexes and supplies around Lao Ngam. Enemy activity continued to be isolated and apparently was not part of any major NVA-supported counter-offensive.¹³ Even though enemy pressure remained relatively light, RLG forces began to feel the impact of their long stay in the field.

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On 29 September, this same irregular task force near Lao Ngam began to experience disorder and morale problems. The four battalions comprising the force had spent 71 days in the field, walking more than 110 kilometers from Saravane to positions near Lao Ngam. During the night of 28 September, 74 men from one battalion deserted and returned to Pakse. In an attempt to discourage further desertion and to keep the task force together, the commander ordered the units to fall back to the west near Ban Navang, 10 kilometers southwest of Lao Ngam. On the afternoon of 29 September, General Ly (Military Region III Irregular Force Commander) visited the troops in an effort to bolster their morale. He directed the task force commander to remain in the Ban Navang area until 6 October when a relief Group Mobile* (GM) composed of FAN units would replace them.¹⁴

The demoralized task force established new positions 13 kilometers southwest of Lao Ngam along Route 231. The formation of the FAN GM proceeded more slowly than originally anticipated due primarily to internal command problems and a reluctance to leave long-established base areas.¹⁵ As a result, 6 October passed without the promised relief for the irregulars. Eventually the irregular task force was withdrawn. A small pro-government force of four companies remained to fill the void, but was only a minor obstacle to the enemy when the NVA moved into Lao Ngam in December.¹⁶

During October, the RLG continued to send patrolling units out from Saravane in an effort to keep the NVA off balance. The Military Region IV Command anticipated that the NVA would launch an attack to

*Similar to a regiment.

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capture the town at the first opportunity, since Saravane was located in a rice-growing valley at a crucial crossroads for traffic leading into the Bolovens. The most organized sweep movement during this period was a friendly operation called Bethesda. Government forces encountered large concentrations of NVA south of Saravane, resulting in several fierce fire-fights. While Operation Bethesda was relatively short (ending on 12 October), commanders in the field considered the objective--keeping the enemy off balance--successfully accomplished.¹⁷

Phase II-- The North Attack on Paksong

Phase II of Operation Sayasila was launched one day after the Royal Government raised the flag over Saravane, and was carried on simultaneously with Phase I operations north of the Bolovens. Phase II was concerned primarily with the reoccupation of the Bolovens Plateau and the recapture of the central-plateau town of Paksong (LS-180, XB3377). The original plan involved a two-pronged attack on the Bolovens, with one arm converging on Paksong from the north while the second arm moved along Route 23 toward Paksong from the west.¹⁸

The original RLG force operating north of Paksong was comprised of three FAR battalions--Battalions Volunteer (BV) 41 and 43 and Battalion Independent (BI) 4. These units began moving into an HLZ located northwest of Paksong at 0920 hours on 29 July. No enemy opposition was reported. By nightfall on the 29th, BVs 41 and 43 were in place; BI-4 was helilifted to the HLZ on 30 July. The total number of government troops in the task force stood at 1,250.¹⁹

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(4) On 30 July, the three battalions moved eastward on an axis parallel to Route 23 in order to attack Paksong from the north. (See Figure 5.) The task force encountered only minor opposition during its first two days in the field. Forward elements were approximately nine kilometers northwest of Paksong by noon on 31 July when the friendlies were attacked by NVA forces estimated at battalion size.²⁰ For the next several days, activity was limited mostly to small unit skirmishes with little friendly progress being made. On 11 August, the FAR task force, now located 11 kilometers northwest of Paksong, was attacked by a force estimated as consisting of three NVA battalions supported by heavy weapons. After being under enemy fire for nearly a full day, the FAR withdrew approximately seven kilometers to the northwest. During the engagement, no air support²¹ was requested.

(5) The three FAR units were replaced by two irregular battalions following the 11 August enemy attack. It was not until a week later that the friendlies northwest of Paksong were again moving toward their objective. The irregulars were able to advance to within five kilometers of Paksong when, on 25 August at 1330 hours, they were routed by another three-battalion NVA counter-attack. The irregulars fled to the northwest in disarray. During this all-day encounter, 100 enemy troops were killed in action (KIA) and many were wounded in action (WIA); the friendlies suffered 32²² KIA, 39 WIA, and 192 missing in action (MIA).

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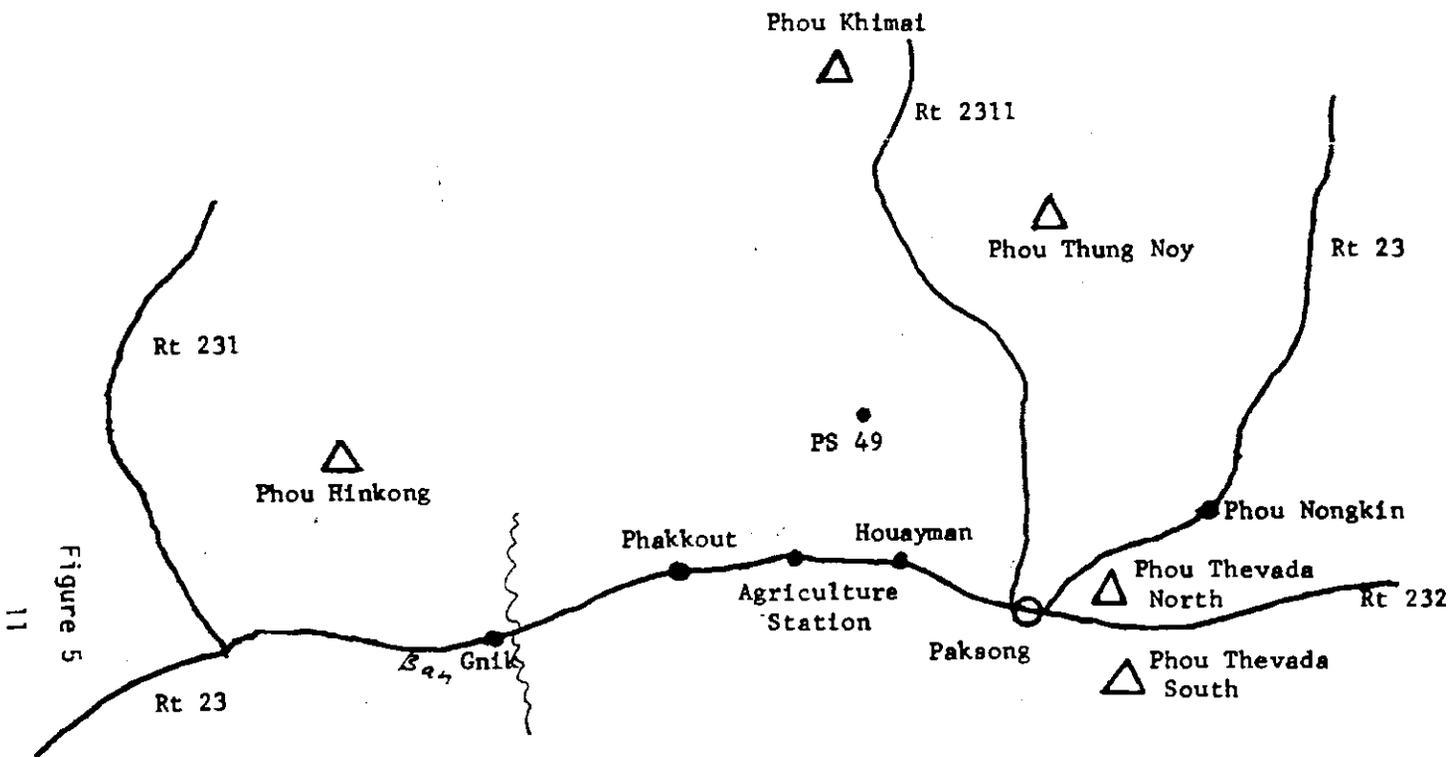


Figure 5
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("Phou": Laotian for Mountain)

PAKSONG AND VICINITY

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Phase II - Movement Along Route 23

(S) During the month of July 1971, the North Vietnamese were in the process of building a system of fortified bunkers and storage areas along Route 23 west of Paksong. The RLG launched a limited offensive on 6 July along the route near the western edge of the Plateau in opposition to this activity. These raids had little success, indicating that it was going to take an all-out effort if Paksong were going to be recaptured.²³

(S) On 29 July at 0800, a FAR battalion [Battalion Parachute (BP)-104] and a FAN battalion [Battalion Commando (BC)-207], accompanied by four armored cars, began moving east on Route 23 toward Ban Gnik (located 28 kilometers east of Pakse). This inaugurated Operation Sayasila's Phase II movement eastward along Route 23.²⁴

(S) In the vicinity of Ban Gnik, the battalions were blocked by an enemy force estimated at three companies firing small arms and 60 millimeter (mm) and 82mm recoilless guns from well-prepared positions. Following intense artillery and RLAF T-28 bombardment, Ban Gnik was finally secured at 1700 hours on 30 July.²⁵ Over the next several days, friendly forces along the route made no progress. It appeared that they had encountered a large enemy holding force.

(S) During the second week of Operation Sayasila, BC-207 and BP-104 were supplemented by BI-7 and BI-9. The force augmentation was partially due to the lack of progress the original two battalions had made along Route 23. On 6 August, BI-7 and BI-9 launched an attack against Ban Phakkout, located eight kilometers west of Paksong on Route 23. The town was secured that afternoon.²⁶

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During the next week, the four-battalion task force was able to advance to an abandoned agricultural station halfway between Ban Phakkout and Ban Houayman. The friendly momentum, however, came to a halt at the station following fierce fighting in the area. A stalemate between the two opposing forces allowed the North Vietnamese to enhance their fortifications in and around Paksong in preparation for any future RLG drives.

On 18 August, the four front-line battalions on Route 23 came under heavy attack; after three hours, Colonel Soutchay (MR IV Commander) ordered the units to withdraw to Ban Phakkout and regroup.²⁷

Over the next 10 days, no significant progress was made along Route 23 by the RLG. By 28 August, the units were still located between Ban Phakkout and the agricultural station. Visual reconnaissance (VR) of the Paksong area by RAVEN FACs revealed evidence of moderate to heavy build-up of enemy defenses along the route and in areas north of Paksong. The NVA could continue their delaying tactics for an extended period of time unless a coordinated RLG offensive was initiated against them, or improved weather permitted large-scale TACAIR strikes against known fortifications, thus forcing the outnumbered enemy to retreat from Paksong.²⁸

Since the campaign was making little progress, AIRA and CAS requested additional air support. AIRA specifically wanted 28 sorties of F-4s per day fraggd to MR IV RAVEN FACs for the period 1-5 September. These sorties, which were "not to be taken from Barrel Roll assets," were to be in addition to the 12 previously allocated.²⁹ Also, instrument flying rule (IFR) boxes were designated around Paksong which would enable U.S. TACAIR and the RLAF to strike predirected target areas during adverse weather conditions.

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(S) The decision to request additional sorties was agreed upon by AIRA and CAS during planning sessions on 30-31 August and forwarded to 7/13th Air Force at Udorn. With only an 11-hour lead time before the first time over target (TOT), 7/13th AF was able to coordinate the request with 7th AF which approved the allocation of 40 sorties per day for MR IV until 5 September.³⁰

(S) The additional sorties were fragged on 1 and 2 September and ground forces west of Paksong received a large increase in air support on 3 September, when a total of 73 RLAF/USAF TACAIR sorties were flown. FACs noted that U.S. TACAIR destroyed many bunker complexes along Route 23. Nevertheless, friendly units on Route 23 remained stationary just east of Ban Phakkout, and the enemy continued to build new bunkers and trenches despite the additional air support.³¹

(S) Since the authority for the additional MR IV sorties expired on 5 September, AIRA requested 46 sorties per day to be fragged to the region. Seven/Thirteenth Air Force again coordinated the request with Seventh Air Force, which then fragged 46 sorties per day for the next 21 days. (On several occasions during this period, the number of sorties was increased to 52.)³²

(S) Despite the air support, the friendlies at Ban Phakkout remained stationary, subjected to constant artillery and mortar fire. During the daylight hours of 7 September, 65 USAF/RLAF TACAIR sorties were flown to support the pro-government forces in the Paksong area. The RLAF flew 39 T-28s, and the USAF flew 24 F-4s and two A-1s. The U.S. Navy also had 28 A-7s in the area.³³

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Phase II - Capture of Paksong

(8) On 11 September, the government drive on Paksong resumed when a four-battalion irregular task force was helilifted from a point 30 kilometers south of Pakse to an HLZ nine kilometers southeast of Paksong. Clear weather permitted TACAIR support, and strikes were conducted against enemy positions on Phou Khimai and Phou Thevada South. Supplementing air support, the friendlies along Route 23 initiated an artillery barrage from Ban Gnik in an effort to pin down the enemy forces and prevent an enemy reaction against the heliborne insertion to the southeast; approximately 500 rounds of 105mm howitzer fire were directed against North Vietnamese units in the vicinity of the agricultural station.³⁴

(9) The battle plan called for the infiltrated troops to move north and then west, hitting Paksong from the east.³⁵ When the helilift was completed, the irregulars followed this strategy and quickly moved to within six kilometers of Paksong by 1800 hours on 11 September. The evening hours brought a stiff enemy counter to the advance. Heavy small arms fire resulted in 12 irregulars KIA and 21 WIA.³⁶

(10) The final groundwork for the eventual assault on Paksong was laid on 12 September when FAR BI-9 and a composite battalion of BI-7 and FAN BC-207 were helilifted to an HLZ seven kilometers east of Paksong. No difficulties were encountered during the operation. These two battalions joined with the two irregular battalions that had moved up from the south; together, the friendlies quickly captured the twin peaks of Phou Thevada overlooking Paksong. In addition to TACAIR, the enemy was now faced with government units to the east, west, and northwest.³⁷

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On 14 September, with TACAIR striking suspected mortar positions outside the town, two 10-man teams entered Paksong from the east and reported only sporadic enemy small arms fire. By 15 September, the city had been surrounded and small infantry units were attempting to clear the town of all remaining NVA. Fighting reportedly raged hand-to-hand and from house-to-house, climaxing in a firefight between the friendlies and the North Vietnamese in the lobby of the town's only hotel. During this action, the troops who were supposed to provide security outside the city became so excited by the battle inside the city that they abandoned their own positions and ran into the town to join in the melee. By the end of the day, the town was under the control of the RLG.³⁸ The battle to take Paksong was supported by 422 U.S. TACAIR sorties from the beginning until the middle of September 1971.³⁹

On 16 September, to provide security in outlying areas, 182 men of an irregular battalion were helilifted to a point two kilometers south of Paksong.⁴⁰ On 19 September, two FAR battalions were helilifted into the town to establish additional defensive positions and to free the irregular battalions for further offensive operations.⁴¹ Although the irregular task force in the Paksong area was under strength, its morale was high.

The next several days were relatively quiet although an irregular battalion tenuously occupied Phou Nongkin, a position overlooking Route 23 seven kilometers northeast of Paksong⁴² and the enemy continued to harass the RLG forces with shellings and mortar fire, especially along Route 23 between Paksong and the agricultural station (which was still not secure).

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Small unit ground assaults were directed against friendly outposts, and Phou Nongkin changed hands twice between 19 and 26 September.⁴³

(S) During the period from 25 September to 2 October, bad weather over most of the Bolovens Plateau restricted air support and interdiction efforts against enemy units regrouping north of Paksong and NVA forces occupying sectors of Route 23 near Ban Phakkout.⁴⁴ Intelligence sources indicated that renewed enemy offensive moves against the RLG on the Bolovens would commence as soon as the NVA had refitted.⁴⁵ Therefore, government troops around Paksong spent most of their time improving defensive positions and patrolling.

(S) The major threat to the friendlies came from the north. When the RLG recaptured Paksong, the NVA 9th Regiment with most of its battalions had moved north to the vicinity of Thateng (LS-210, XC4870). Three other enemy battalions remained in the immediate area northwest of Paksong.⁴⁶ Elements of these enemy units continued to probe the defense perimeter of Paksong, utilizing economy-of-force tactics (mortar harassment and unpredictable weapons fire).

(S) Although the enemy was ever-present, they remained elusive. Rarely were lucrative targets available for RLAFF and USAF TACAIR. Targets of opportunity would become lost to sight shortly after being observed. For example, on 7 October at 2250 hours, an RLAFF AC-47 gunship (Spooky 625) reported sighting six enemy trucks led by one tank approximately 11 kilometers north of Paksong. The gunship expended on the target, but the results were not observed (RNO). A B-57 (Redbird 03) and an AC-130 (Spectre 22) were summoned

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shortly thereafter, but the target had disappeared under the jungle canopy.⁴⁷

Though Paksong had been retaken by government forces in September, Route 23 leading west to Pakse remained to be cleared. By mid-October, enemy mortar positions had zeroed in on the Paksong landing strip, forcing resupply of the city by airdrop. Thus, it became necessary to clear the Pakse-Paksong road of the remaining NVA forces so that it could be used to supply RLG troops on the Bolovens. Consequently, the period from 18 to 23 October was spent clearing and securing Route 23. The effort involved a four-battalion force heading east from Ban Phakkout and a two-battalion force moving west from Paksong. These units were to meet between the agricultural station and Ban Houayman.⁴⁸

The North Vietnamese attempted to thwart the friendlies by constant 82mm and 60mm mortar and 122mm rocket fire. In spite of the enemy resistance, government forces met as programmed on 20 October. By 23 October, the road was secure, and RLG engineers began to repair the road surface of damages sustained during the fighting.⁴⁹

During the latter part of the month, government forces conducted two sweep operations in an effort to expand the RLG area of control around Paksong. The first, Operation Red Arrow, sent an irregular battalion south and southeast of Paksong as far as 19 kilometers from the city. Light enemy contact was reported, and the only significant occurrence during the sweep was the reoccupation of the twin peaks of Phou Thevada on 27 October, from which the friendlies had withdrawn earlier.⁵⁰

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(S) The second sweep operation, Phou Xang (Elephant Mountain), was launched to clear the area north of Paksong. Again enemy resistance was light even though an irregular battalion moved a distance of 19 kilometers north and northwest from Paksong. On 29 October, following TACAIR and artillery strikes, the irregulars captured Nongkin Village and Phou Nongkin. While both of these operations had inconclusive results, they did succeed in bringing virtually all the high points around Paksong under RLG control. 51

Operation Sayasila Ends

(S) On 1 November, CAS/Udorn advised the 7/13th AF Directorate of Intelligence that Operation Sayasila had been officially terminated on 31 October. The two primary goals of Operation Sayasila--recapturing Saravane and Paksong--had been attained. These two towns were secure under Royal Government control, and government activity now had to be concentrated on their defense. 52 The enemy continued to control much of the route structure in MR IV, which presented problems for RLG logistics and troop movements. The government had hoped that Route 16/23 west of Saravane would be interdicted and that the enemy logistics bases south of the Se Don River and north of Lao Ngam would be destroyed during Operation Sayasila. This, however, was not accomplished. Had the friendlies been able to succeed in these maneuvers, the North Vietnamese supply of food and equipment would possibly have become critical, perhaps impairing enemy activity on the Plateau well into the dry season.

(S) Lao difficulties in meeting all the objectives of Operation Sayasila stemmed from two primary causes: (1) adverse weather during

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much of the period and (2) the tenacious enemy, skillfully led by the North Vietnamese commander in MR IV. The leader of the NVA 9th Regiment was General Minh. He was considered such an excellent tactician that the U.S. nickname for him was "Robert E. Lee Minh." He had command of the situation throughout Operation Sayasila, even though his forces were losing ground to the RLG. He was able to shift his units to exploit weaknesses in the Lao offensive, thus lengthening Operation Sayasila from a one-month operation to a three-month campaign. ⁵³

(C) Ground casualties suffered during Operation Sayasila included 136 friendlies KIA and 302 WIA. Enemy casualties were estimated at 177 KIA and 104 WIA. The enemy figures do not include casualties inflicted by TACAIR and gunship sorties since these could not be accurately verified. ⁵⁴

(C) The amount of time required to secure the two main objectives-- Paksong and Saravane--apparently prevented the government from preparing an adequate defense of their gains. Many of the RLG forces were in the field constantly during the campaign, not benefiting from a recuperation period prior to the beginning of the dry season in late October. CAS planners developing the ground operations did so without benefit of a realistic, integrated appraisal of what air support would be required or could be provided and sometimes did not react to a deteriorating situation until it became critical. ⁵⁵

(C) Nonetheless, Operation Sayasila was a success; territory had been regained at the expense of the North Vietnamese. Even so, the problems in coordination and the lack of complete control of the Bolovens Plateau

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left the victory hollow--the enemy still had the means and the strength to attack.

Operation Bedrock

(6) The objective of Operation Bedrock was to sweep through known operating locations of the 46th NVA battalion to prevent it from establishing control over the rice-rich land around the city of Saravane. This operation began on 1 November when an irregular GM of four battalions began movement south of Route 16/23 from Saravane to a point 17 kilometers southwest of the town. The next day, the GM captured the strategic road junction of Routes 16/23/231, 21 kilometers southwest of Saravane. The friendlies also secured a fire base on Phou Kong Noy overlooking the junction, and they assigned one of their battalions and a heavy weapons company to occupy the site.

(7) Although the friendlies reported numerous enemy contacts on 3 and 4 November, the irregulars were able to maintain the initiative with the aid of TACAIR and heavy weapons. On 5 November, the three remaining battalions captured and occupied Ban Naxain Noy, a village 18 kilometers southwest of Saravane. A villager reported that the headquarters of the 46th NVA battalion had been in the village but had been withdrawn the previous night.⁵⁷ There were no significant enemy contacts during the next several days even though one irregular battalion moved south along Route 16/23 and camped at Ban Lavang, and one irregular battalion moved nine kilometers north of the enemy stronghold at Thateng. On 9 November, the operation was terminated and the GM began withdrawing to Saravane.

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CHAPTER III
OPERATION THAO LA

[REDACTED] Since the Royal Lao government had been unsuccessful in securing the Bolovens Plateau during Operation Sayasila, a new plan, named Operation Thao La, was developed. The objective of the plan was to drive the enemy out of the eastern Bolovens by interdicting them at Ban Phon on Route 16 and simultaneously securing the town of Thateng.⁵⁸ Thateng was a large supply base for the NVA 9th Regiment, and its capture would seriously degrade the NVA operational capability.⁵⁹

[REDACTED] Due to a JCS message of 28 August 1971 which required JCS approval for helicopter support of multi-battalion operations, the planning for this operation was more thorough than that for Operation Sayasila and involved close coordination with both 7AF and 7/13AF.⁶⁰

[REDACTED] Based on this directive, air support planning for Operation Thao La required a longer lead time. The initial request from AIRA for Operation Thao La air support reached 7/13th AF on 15 November. They asked for 10 mining sorties for D-1 (20 November), 18 TACAIR sorties plus two gunships per day for D through D+2, and 24 TACAIR sorties (and two gunships) per day for D+3 through D+14.⁶¹ This longer lead time enabled 7/13th AF to coordinate the request with Seventh Air Force more effectively and permitted Seventh Air Force to use its resources more efficiently.

[REDACTED] Operation Thao La involved three task forces. Two of these units were to converge on the town of Thateng from the north and south respectively. The third unit was to take the town of Ban Phon, east of Thateng, then maneuver

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westward, eventually linking with the friendlies converging on Thateng.

All three units deployed out of Saravane. (See Figure 6.)

The operation began on 21 November. The northern task force (consisting of three battalions) deployed overland from Saravane, and by 23 November had reached positions five kilometers northeast of its objective without any appreciable enemy resistance. ⁶² During the movement south, the friendlies overran what appeared to be the 49th NVA field hospital at Ban Nlongnok, only five kilometers northeast of Thateng. ⁶³

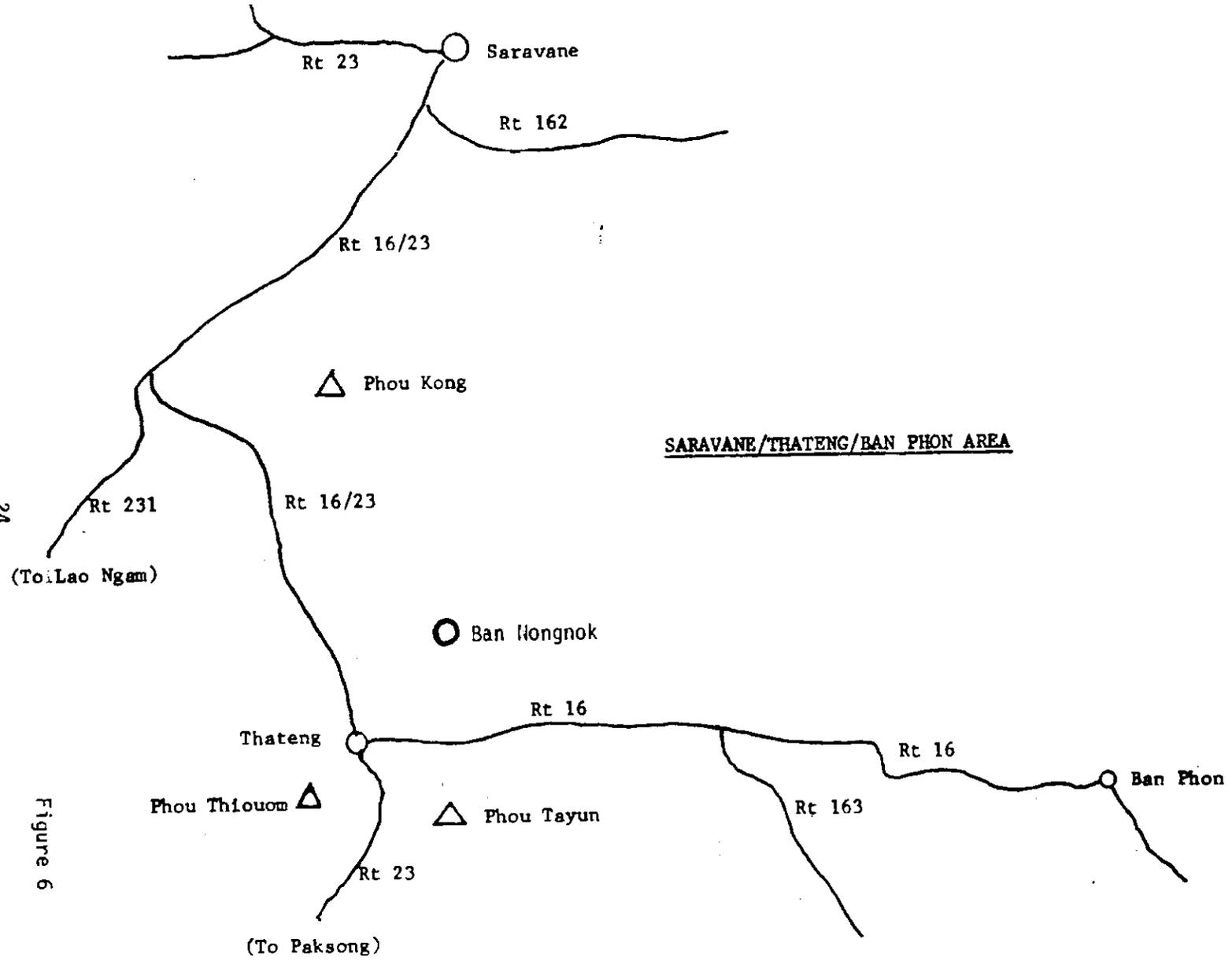
When the northern task force reached Ban Nongnok on 23 November, seven flights of U.S. TACAIR began to prepare an HLZ at Phou Thiouom. A fourth battalion from Saravane was helilifted the same day by four CH-53 ⁶⁴ helicopters onto the mountain top located just to the southwest of Thateng. Initial attempts to land the troops were frustrated by concentrated enemy fire and USAF A-1s escorting the CH-53s had to suppress the heavy ground fire from some 50 NVA troops in the area. During the operation an Air American contract helicopter participating with the CH-53s was damaged and two crewmen were injured. The one-battalion task force established a fire support base (FSB) on Phou Thiouom, providing heavy weapons support over the entire Thateng Gap. One 75mm pack howitzer, three 75mm recoilless rifles, and three 81mm mortars composed the weaponry atop the highground ⁶⁵ position.

The eastern arm of Operation Thao La was launched on the morning of 21 November. Using USAF and contract helicopters escorted by USAF A-1s, 1,150 irregular MR III troops and 3,000 pounds of cargo were helilifted from

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Figure 6



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Saravane to the primary HLZ north of the town. The HLZ had previously
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been prepared by F-4 strikes. The helicopters received no ground fire,
and by 1100 hours the infiltration of four battalions into the Ban Phon
area was successfully terminated. Except for minor skirmishes, Ban Phon
was cleared that same day without resistance. All four battalions of the
GM established their command posts within a two kilometer radius of the
village.

~~As~~ As of 25 November, all friendly units were in place. Enemy reac-
tion to Operation Thao La had been light, and only sporadic fighting was
being reported. Irregulars discovered supply caches in the area which
had been left unattended by the NVA. For example, one battalion operating
north of Thateng reported seizing two tons of sugar, one ton of coffee,
and 20 tubs of lard.⁶⁷ On 26 November, RLG forces began consolidating
their hold on the Thateng area. Two irregular battalions which had been
held in reserve at Toong Set (PS-49--LS-449, X83781) moved north to join
the friendlies entering Thateng from the south. During the afternoon of
26 November, the NVA logistics center of Thateng, which had been occupied
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for three years, was captured.

~~Government~~ Government forces immediately began to strengthen defenses around
Thateng. A 4.2 inch mortar was moved onto a hill south of the village,
and an additional 75mm pack howitzer was helilifted onto the fire support
69
base on Phou Thiouom.

[REDACTED]

The Ban Phon-Route 16 Operation

On 28 November, the four-battalion irregular task force at Ban Phon began moving west and commenced searching and clearing the Route 16 valley in the direction of Thateng. By 30 November, the GM reported that it was located midway between Ban Phon and Thateng, and that enemy contacts were increasing.⁷⁰

On 1 December, the friendlies captured four enemy trucks on Route 16, two of which were still operable.⁷¹ Encouraged by the success, the GM formed its battalions in a line running north and south at the village of Ban Nokkthong and continued its sweeping operation. This was an effort to locate and destroy suspected enemy units and supply points in the area and to disrupt the enemy's rice harvesting activities.⁷²

The Irregular Departure from the Thateng Sector

Toward the end of November, friendly units around Thateng began reporting numerous squad-sized clashes on the town's defense perimeter. The level of contact significantly increased on 3 December when an irregular battalion at Thateng was attacked by a battalion-sized enemy force. During one of the assaults, a squad leader realized that he and his squad were surrounded by over 50 NVA troops. In desperation he requested an air strike on his own position. The request was approved, and RLAF T-28s struck them.⁷³ The squad leader and his squad were reported missing after the battle.*

In response to the increase in enemy activity around Thateng, AIRA-Vientiane requested additional air support. In his message to 7/13th AF he stated that.⁷⁴

*Perhaps an exclamation point would be the most appropriate punctuation! (Ed.)

[REDACTED]

enemy reaction to Thao La is becoming stronger and [more] frequent. From all indications, the enemy is determined to counter friendly efforts to search and clear Thateng/Route 16. . . . Request a minimum of 24 sorties of fast movers to be fragged to MR IV through 11 December. Sorties will be primarily in support of Operation Thao La.

The request was coordinated with Seventh Air Force in Saigon and granted.

(~~)~~ The situation around Thateng continued to worsen as reports were received that enemy reinforcements were preparing to move into the Thao La area of operations. As a result, another air support request from AIRA was submitted which asked for immediate CBU-42 mining of two possible approach routes.⁷⁵ In anticipation of continuing heavy enemy activity, AIRA also requested that the fragging of 24 sorties of fast-movers per day be extended through 27 December 1971.⁷⁶ Seventh Air Force approved the request.

(~~)~~ Commencing at 2000 hours on 9 December and continuing throughout the night, two NVA infantry battalions supported by four tanks and indirect fire attacked the irregular GM in Thateng. The advancing enemy units split into two columns north of the town, with two tanks supporting each column. During the attack, one of the tanks broke through the Thateng defense perimeter and began firing its guns in a 360 degree circle while turning on one tread. Two irregular battalions dispersed as a result. At 0430 hours on 10 December, the tanks withdrew from the area, leaving the irregulars with 20 KIA and 23 WIA. Enemy losses were not reported.⁷⁷ During the morning of the 10th, RAVEN FACs overhead directed TACAIR strikes