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Indochina Monographs

RLG Military Operations and Activities in the Laotian Panhandle

by

Brig. Gen. Soutchay Vongsavanh

U.S. ARMY CENTER OF MILITARY HISTORY
WASHINGTON, D.C.

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

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

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

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Preface

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

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

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

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

Soutchay Vongsavanh
Brigadier General, RLA

McLean, Virginia
21 February 1978

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CHAPTER I

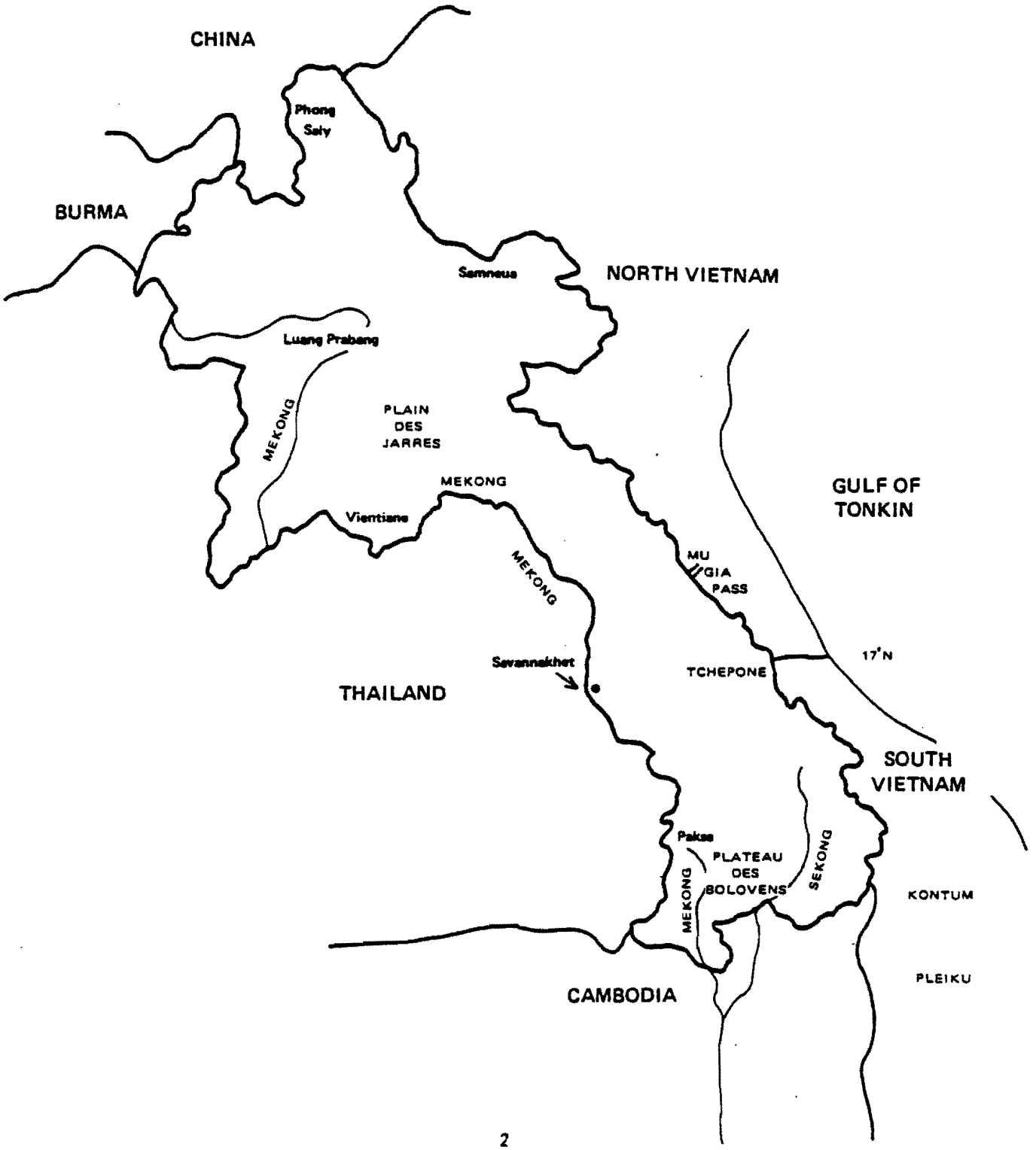
Introduction

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

The Laos Panhandle

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

Map 1 – The Key Position of Laos in Indochina



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

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

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

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

The Ho Chi Minh Trail

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

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

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

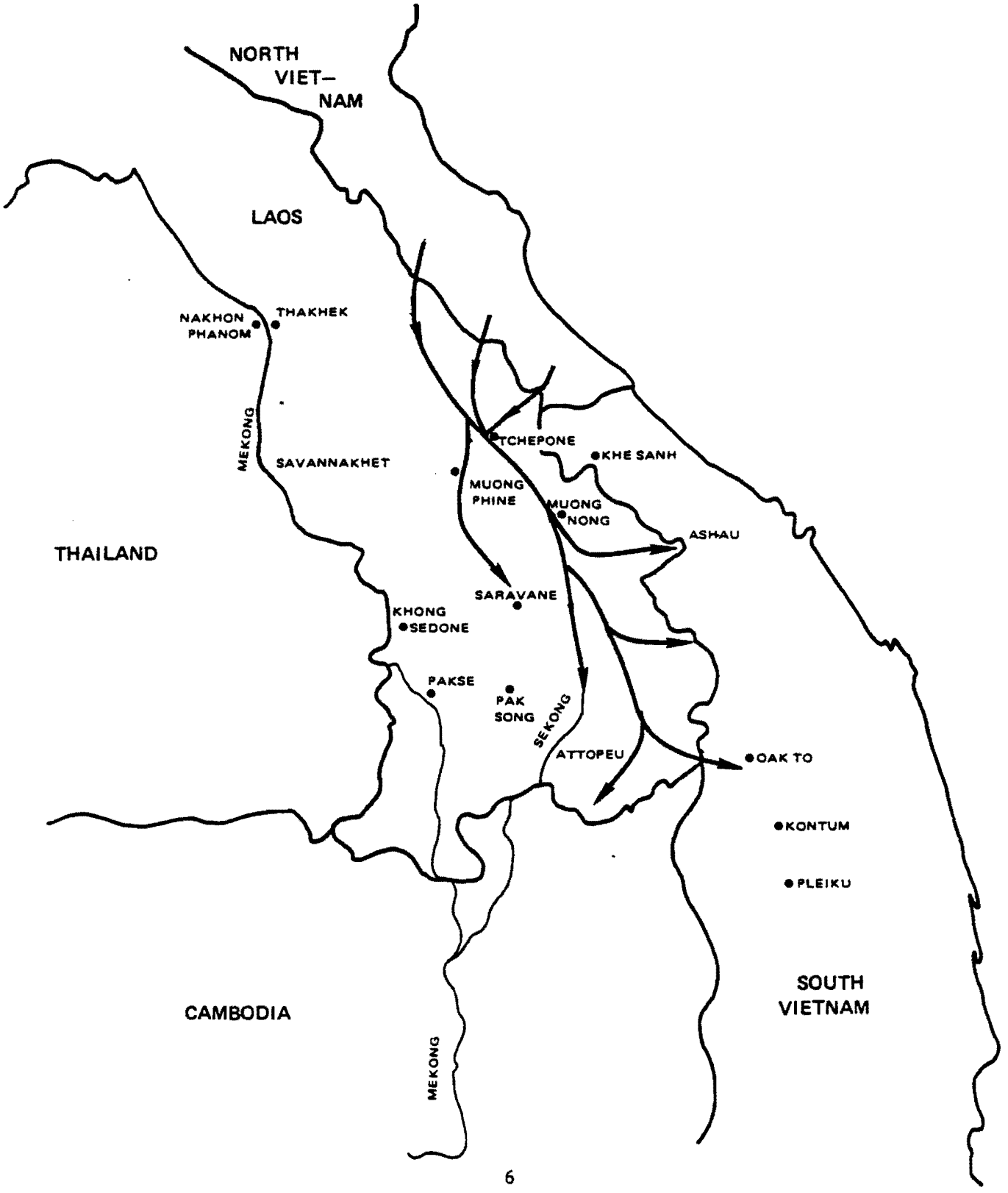
The passes across the Annamite Mountains between Vietnam and Laos are at relatively low elevations but approaches to these passes are through a wide strip of rugged terrain deeply cut by torrents and forested with thick jungle. Roads had to be engineered under most difficult conditions.

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

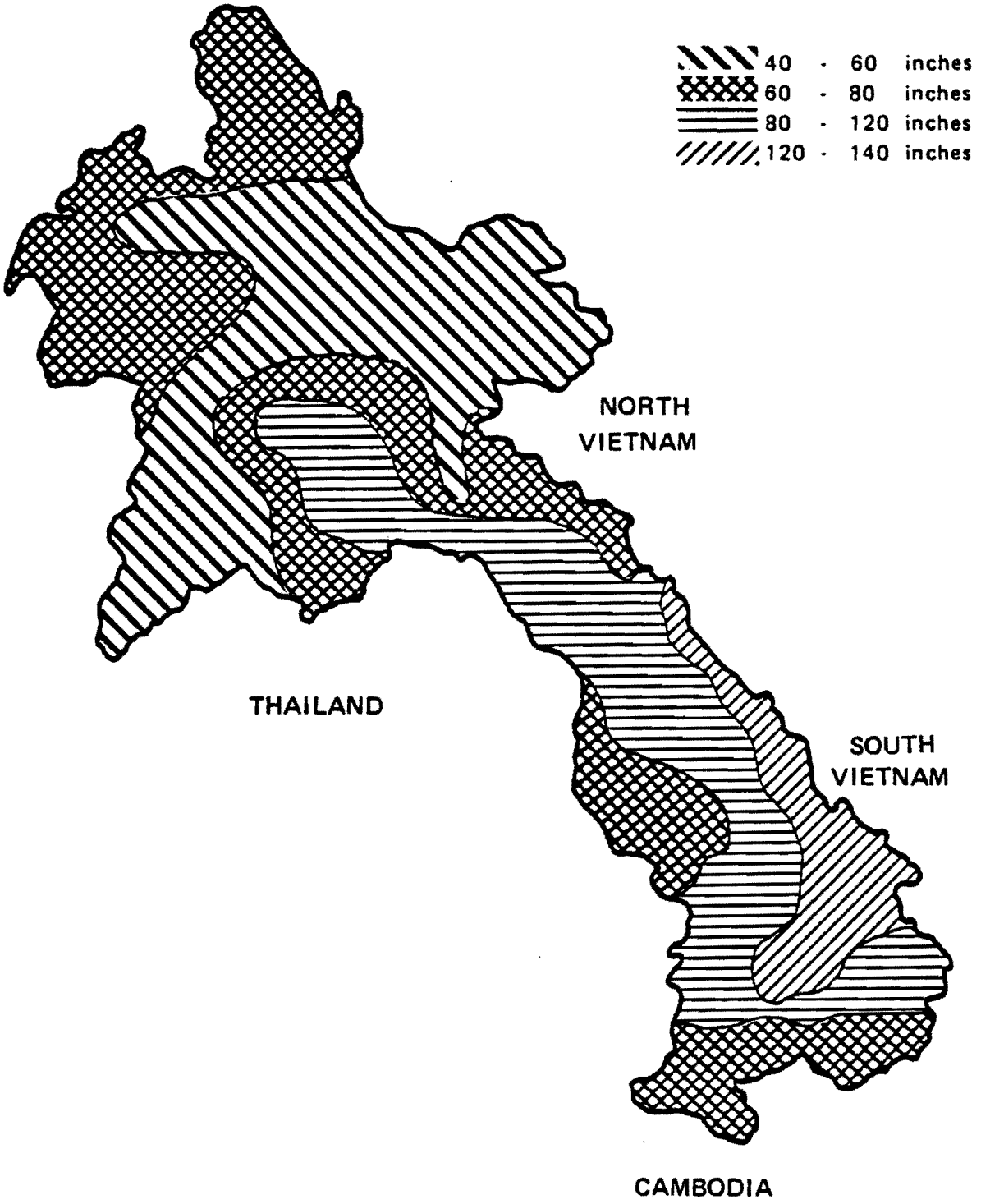
This trail continues into the southern portion of South Vietnam and although it was referred to in the singular, it actually comprised a whole network of paths which could be used or abandoned as attempts at interdiction dictated. Many portions of the trail passed under thick tall trees, making it difficult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

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

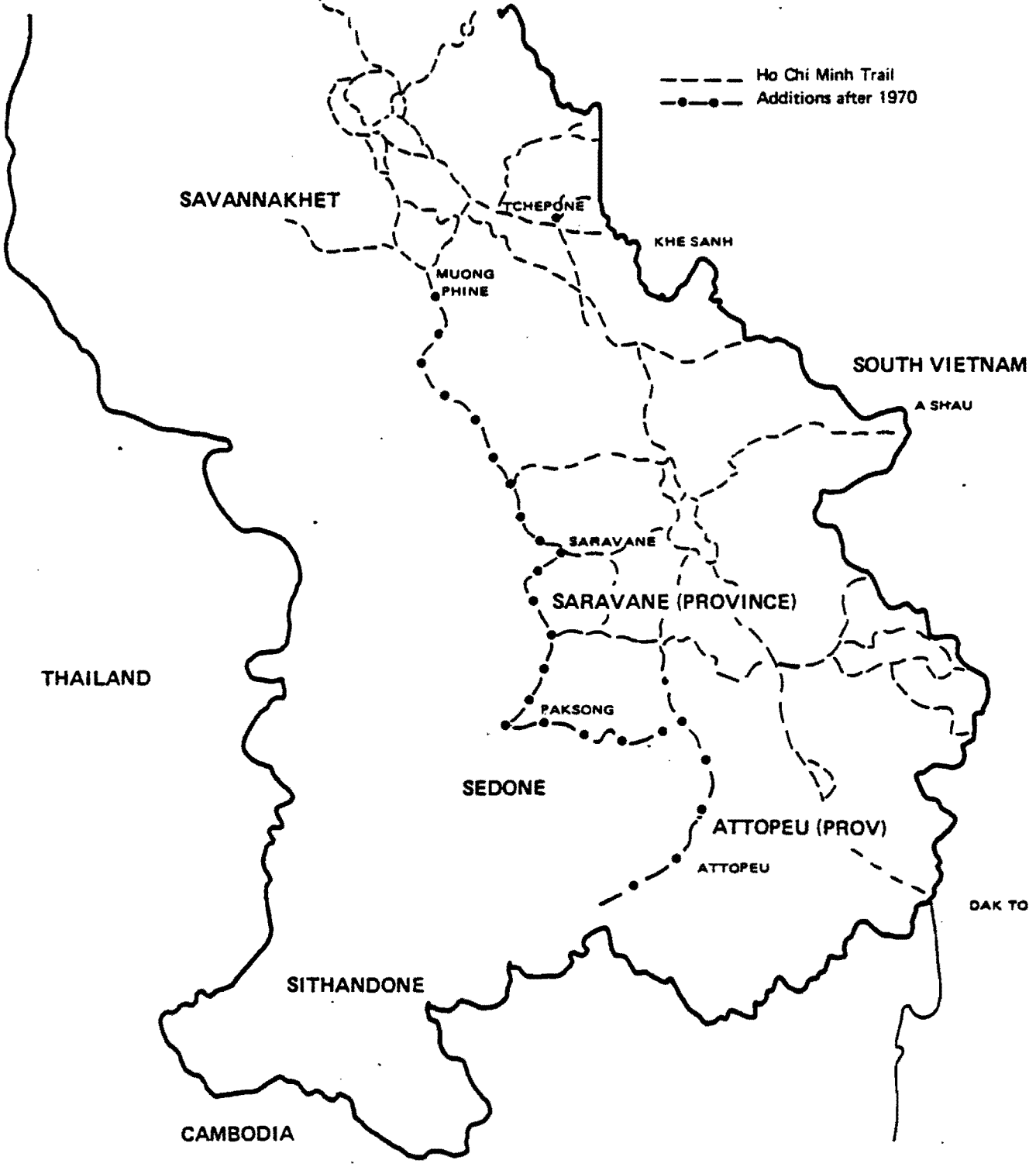
Map 2 – Ho Chi Minh Trail



Map 3 – Annual Rainfall In Laos



Map 4 – The Ho Chi Minh Trail After 1970



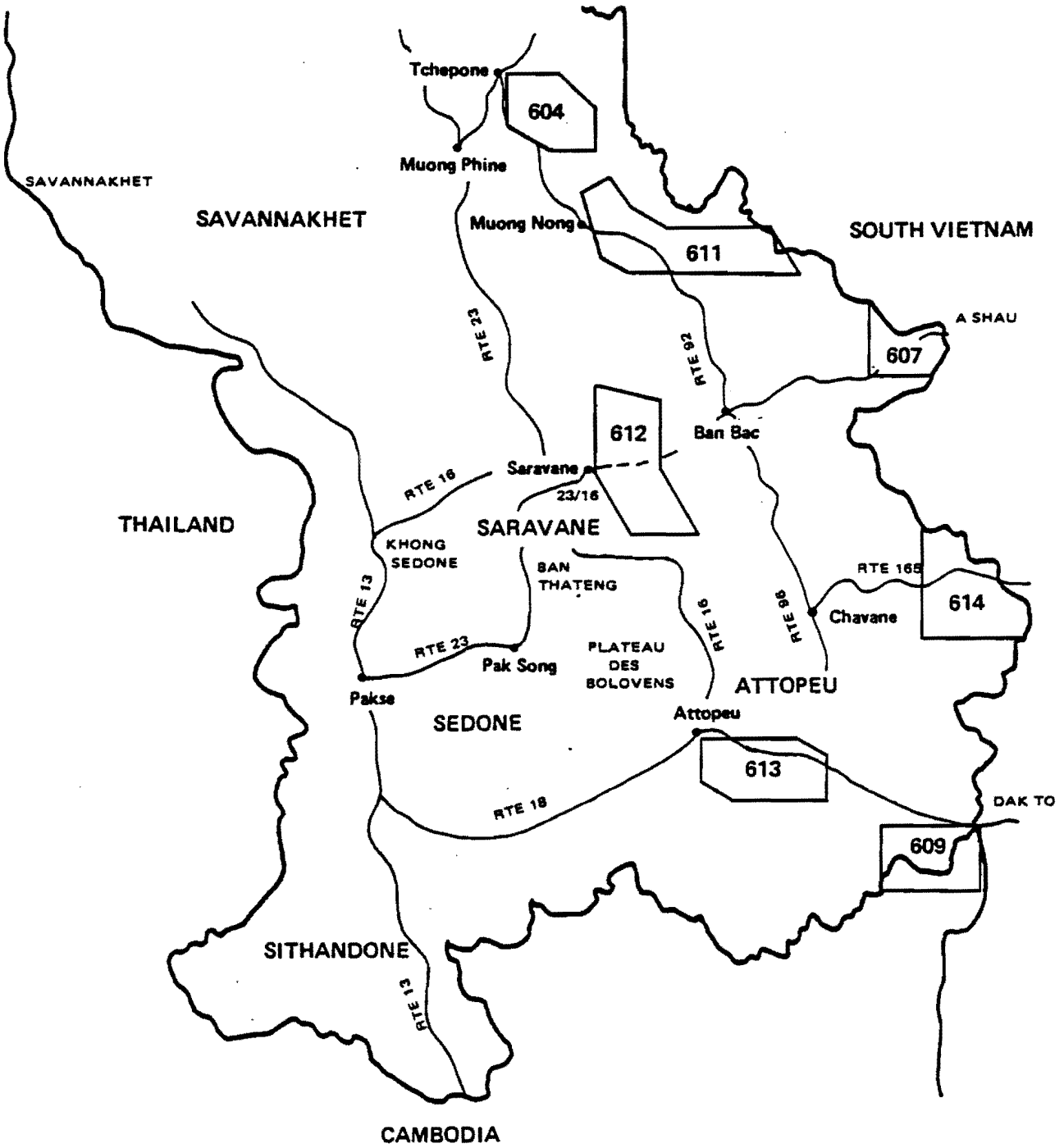
The governor-general of Indochina also spoke fondly of extending the motorable road existing then from Savannakhet to Muong Phine, near Tchepone, with Dong Ha, but budgetary constraints made such an enterprise impossible at that time. Following the March 9, 1945 *Coup,* the Viet Minh clamped their hold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

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

Base Area 604 - Tchepone[1]
Base Area 611 - East of Muong Nong
Base Area 612 - Between Sarvane and Ban Bac

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

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



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

Base Area 614 - East of Chavane

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

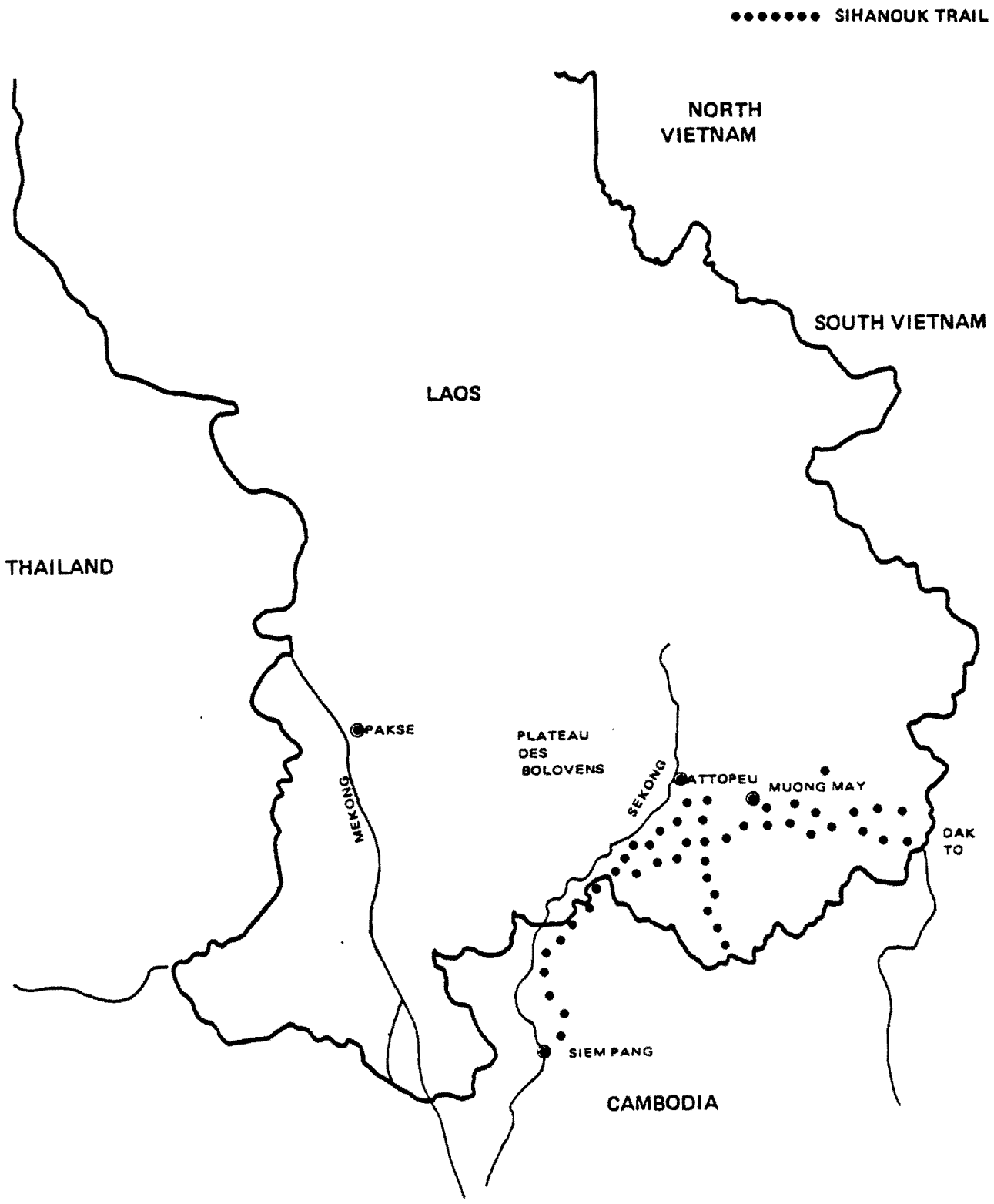
a strategic rear area of South Vietnam. NVA engineer units maintained the existing roads and built new ones. They also built the storage areas along the trail. Vietnamese labor battalions, including women, kept roads, paths, and storage areas in good repair. Vietnamese medical personnel maintained infirmaries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

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

The Sihanouk Trail

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

Map 6 – Sihanouk Trail



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

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

> "We had no neutrality. Now we are a colony of the Americans and are occupied by 65,000 South Vietnamese troops, mercenaries of Americans. I was deposed on March 18, 1970, because it was said that I allowed {Viet Cong and Viet Minh to occupy Cambodia}. They sometimes did come to Cambodia because of some necessity, some strategic or tactical necessity. But this was within the framework or their fight against the United States, to liberate their homeland."
>
> "Even if they were in Cambodia, they looked toward Saigon. All their efforts were directed toward Saigon and South Vietnam, they wanted to liberate South Vietnam, they never looked in our direction. They recognized *de jure* our frontiers; even in the future, after their victory, they cannot change the frontiers of Cambodia."

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

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

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

The Pathet Lao

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

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

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

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

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

Relations Between the Pathet Lao and the NVA

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

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

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

The congress produced a platform containing the following significant clauses:

> The people of Vietnam must unite closely with the people of Laos and Cambodia and give them every assistance in the common struggle against imperialist aggression, for the complete liberation in Indochina and the defense of world peace.
>
> In the common interest of the three peoples, the people of Vietnam are willing to enter into long term cooperation with the peoples of Laos and Cambodia, with a view to bringing about an independent, strong and prosperous federation of the states of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia if the three peoples so desire.

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

Significant Developments Following the 1962 Geneva Agreement

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER II

The Organization and Employment of Irregular Forces in Southern Laos

The Military Regions

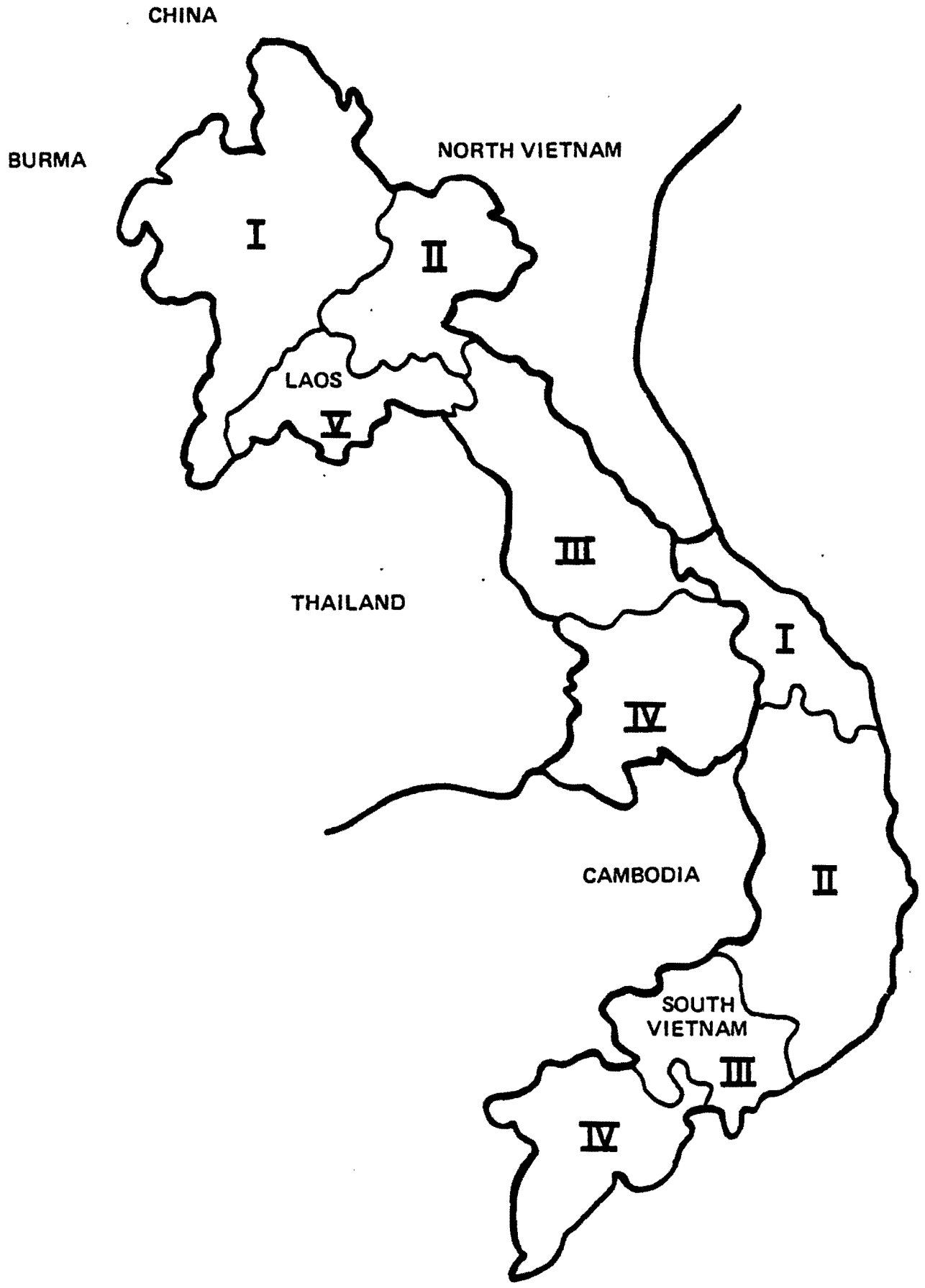
Laos was divided into five military regions two of which were located in the panhandle. *(Map 7)* Military Region I at Luang Prabang was dominated by the royal family and the former commander in Chief of the Royal Laos Army, General Oune Rathikul. The region commander was Brigadier General Tiao Sayavong,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

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

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

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

Map 7 — Indochina Military Regions



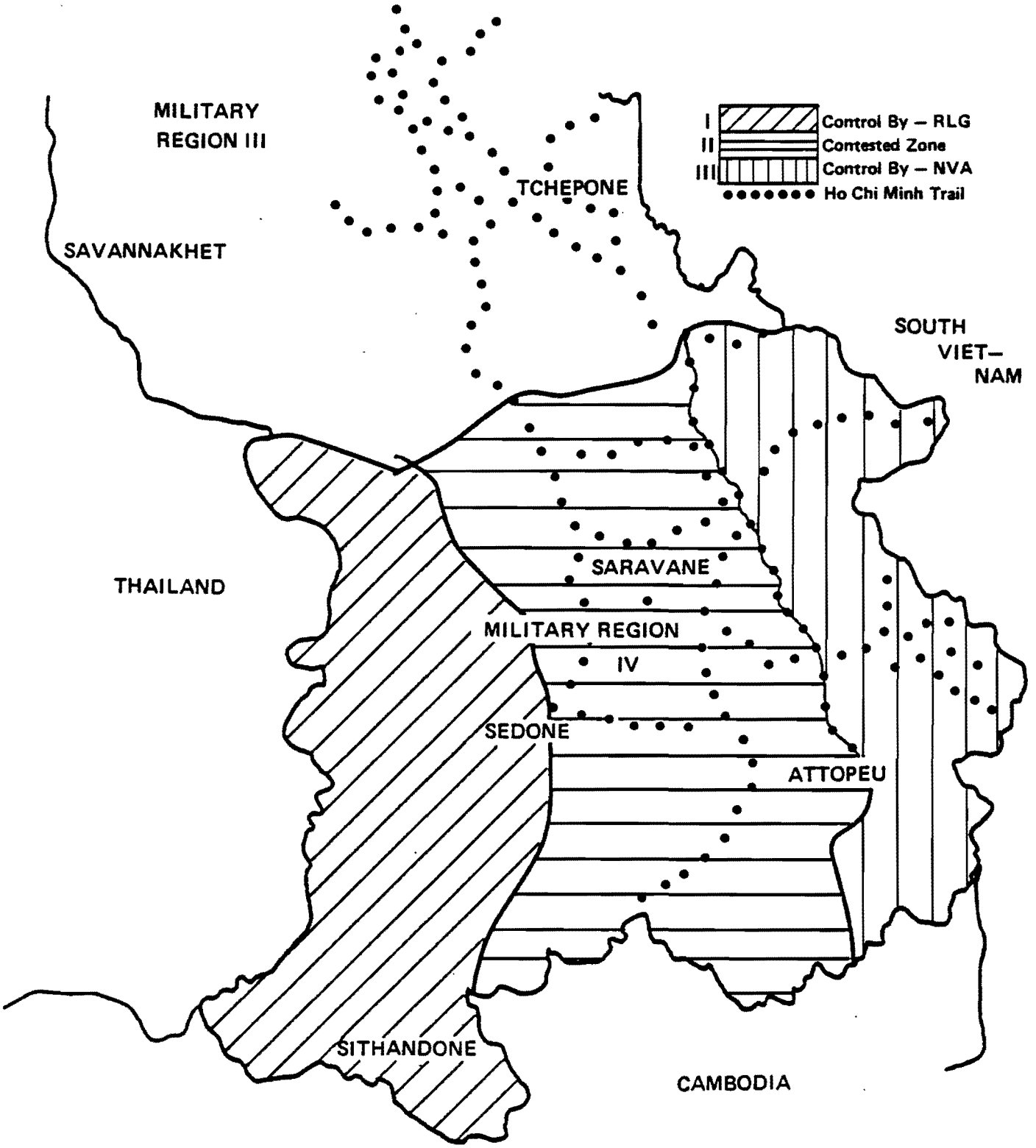
Military Region V contained Borikhane and Vientiane Provinces, the capital province of Laos, was headquartered at Chinaimo Army Camp and was led by Major General Kouprasith Abhay until he was replaced by Brigadier General Thongligh Chokbeng Boun in July 1971.

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

Interdiction of the NVA Logistics System in the Panhandle

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

South Vietnamese Activities in the Panhandle

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Coordination between Cambodia and Laos in the Panhandle

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

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

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

with their cadres, to train in MR IV at PS-18.[1] These new recruits received excellent training and were well motivated during their three months in Laos. After training, the two battalions were sent into combat on the Bolovens Plateau against the NVA. Here they were baptized by fire and identified as Battalion 601 and 602 but they did not fight well; their country had been at peace for a long time and their cadres, trained in the French Army tradition, knew more of theory than of practice. After two months against the NVA in the panhandle they were returned to Cambodia.

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

Laos Irregulars Before 1970

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

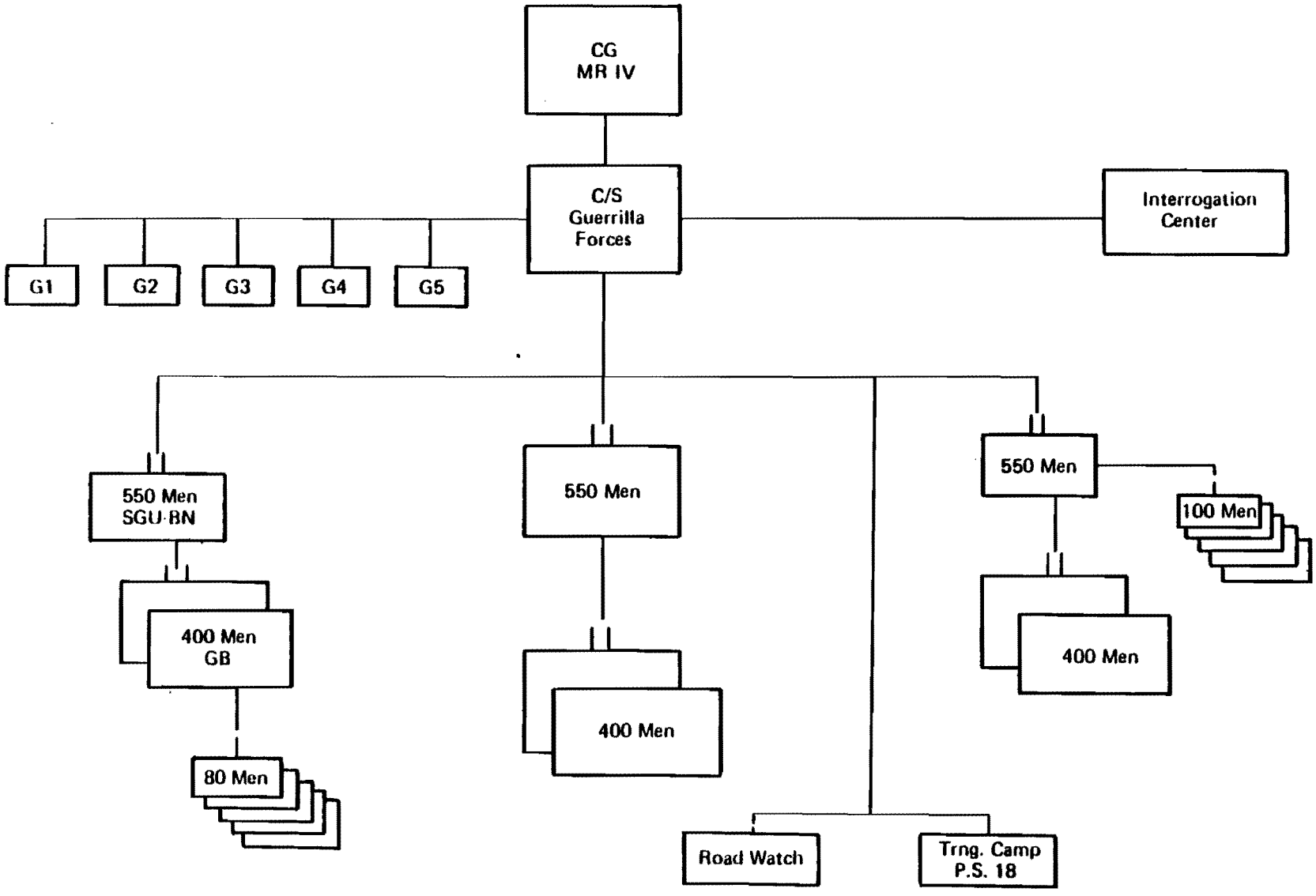

Chart 1 — The Irregular Organization in Military Region IV Before 1970

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

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

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

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

officer with the irregulars.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Map 9 – The Guerrila Zones In Military Region IV Before 1970