

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

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

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

Laos Irregulars After 1970

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

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

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

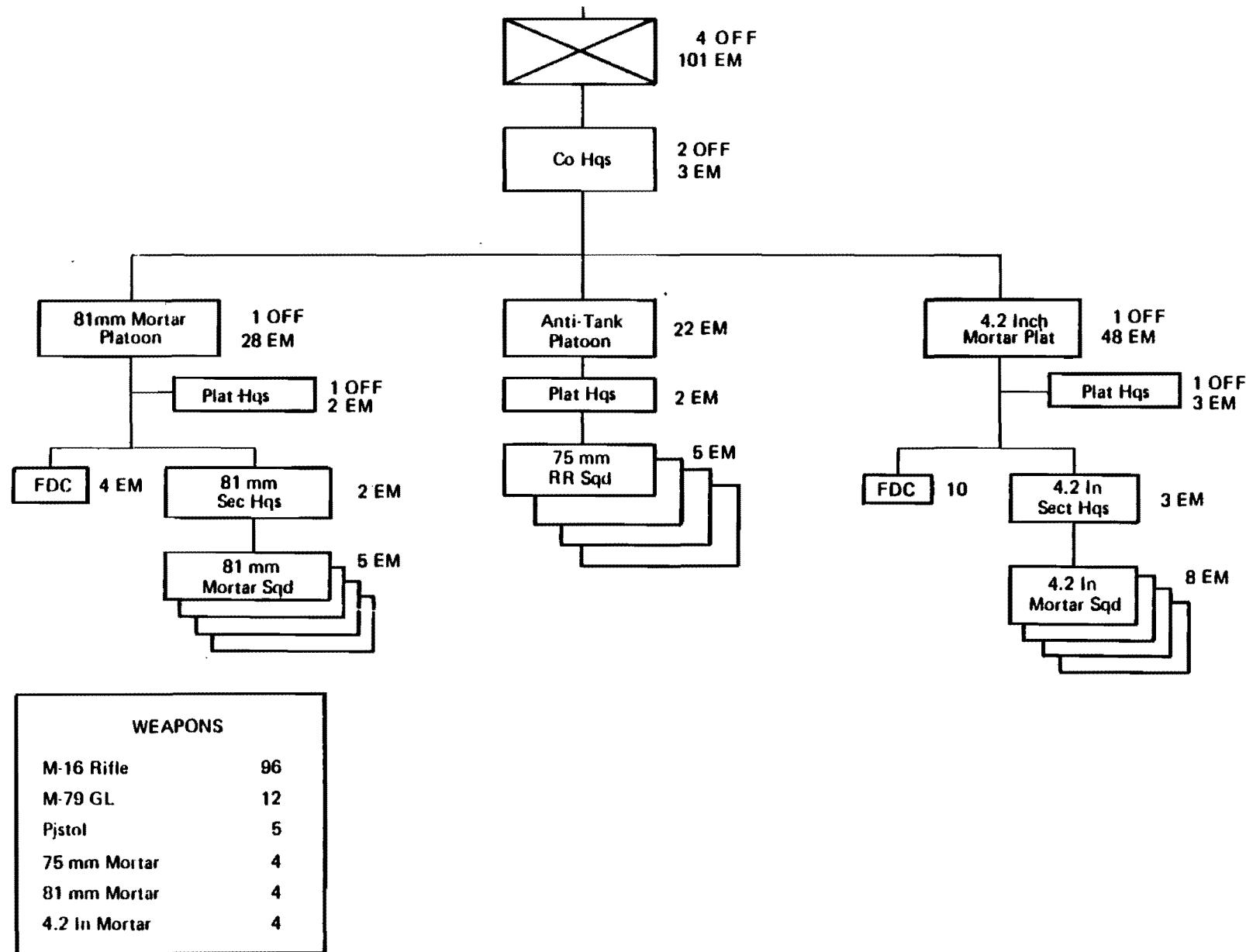


Chart 2 – Lao Irregular Heavy Weapons Company (Organic to GM)

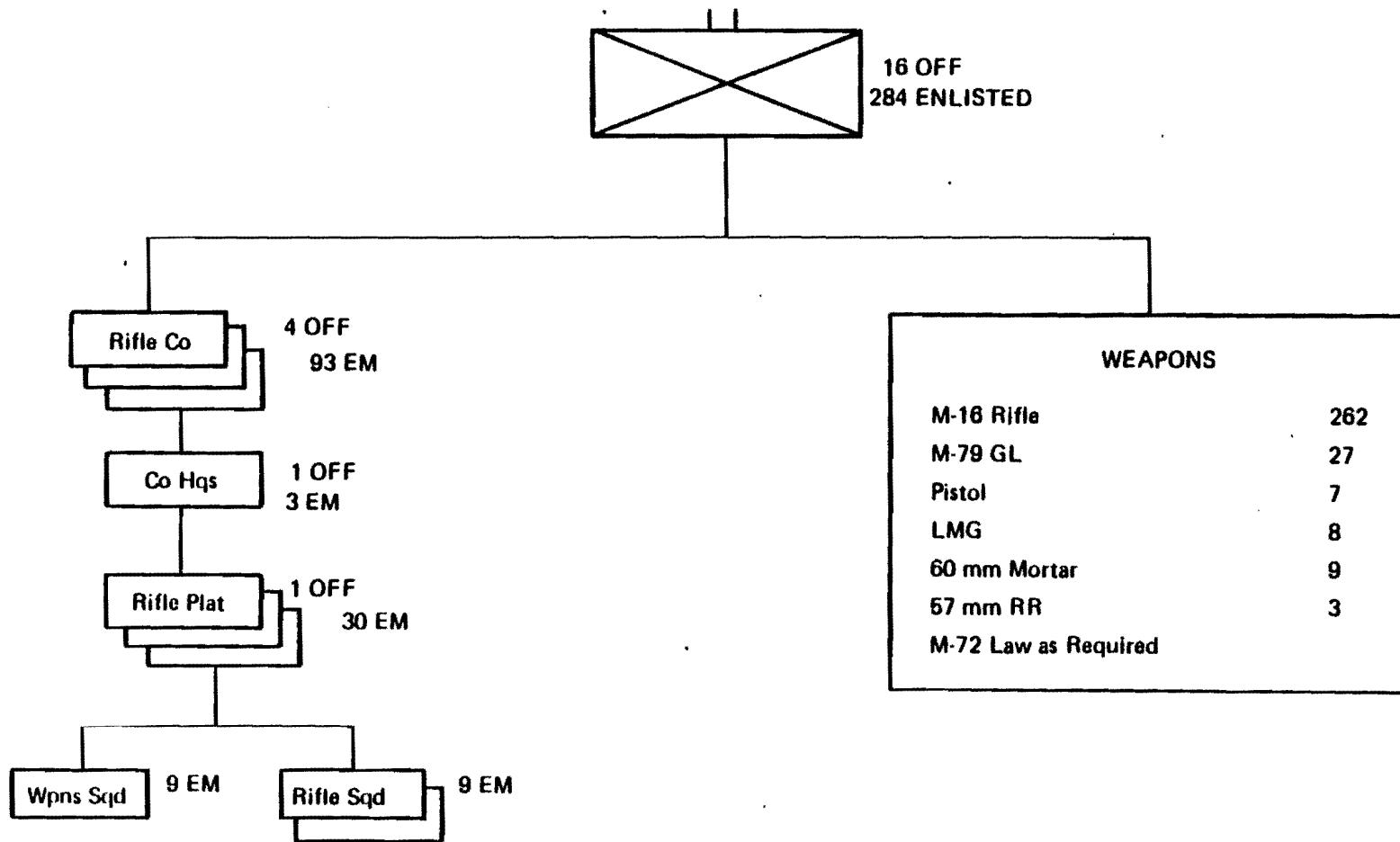


Chart 3 – Lao Irregular Battalion (Organic to GM)

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

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

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

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

Command Problems

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

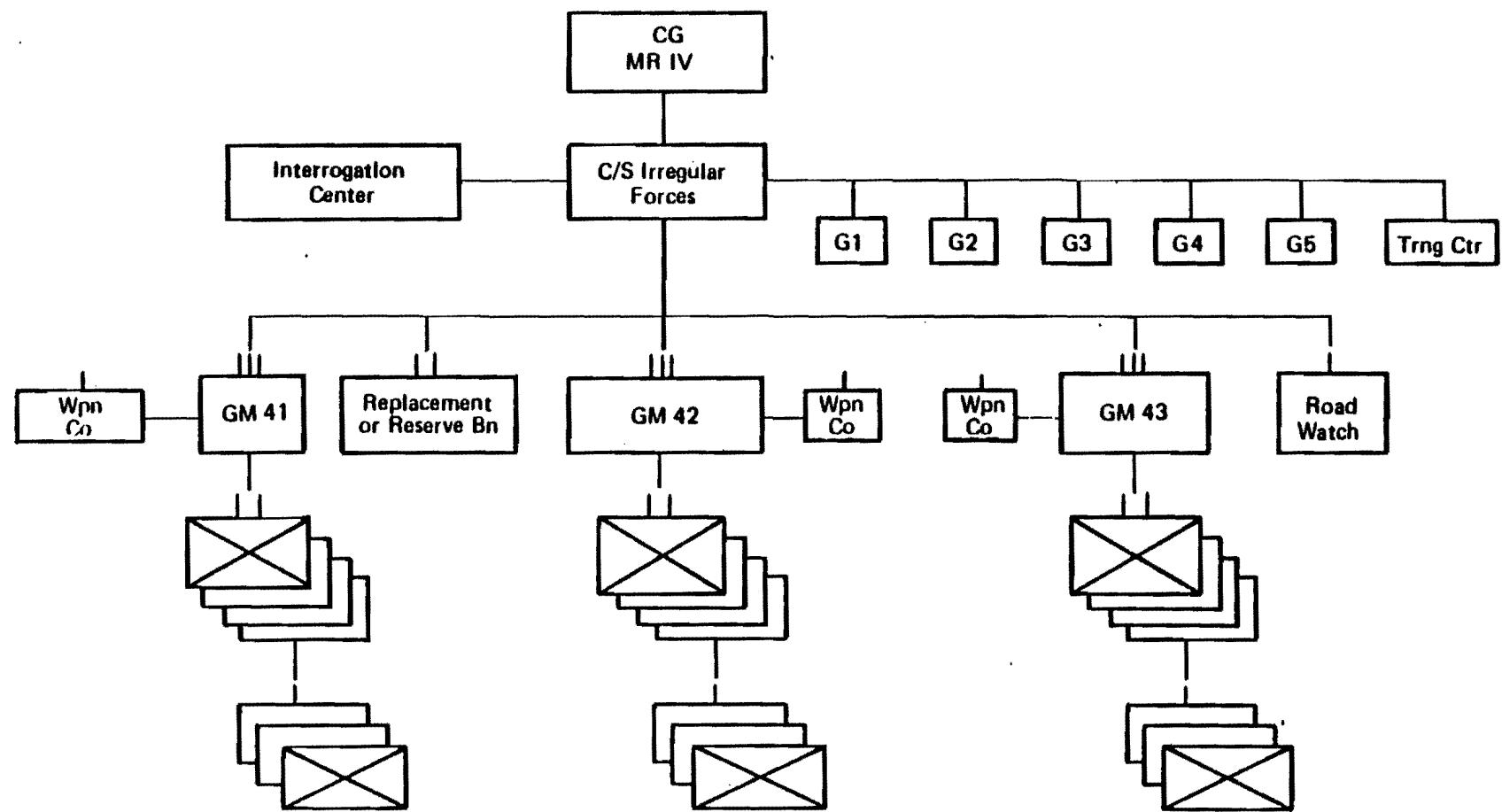


Chart 4 – The Organization Irregular Forces in MR IV After 1970

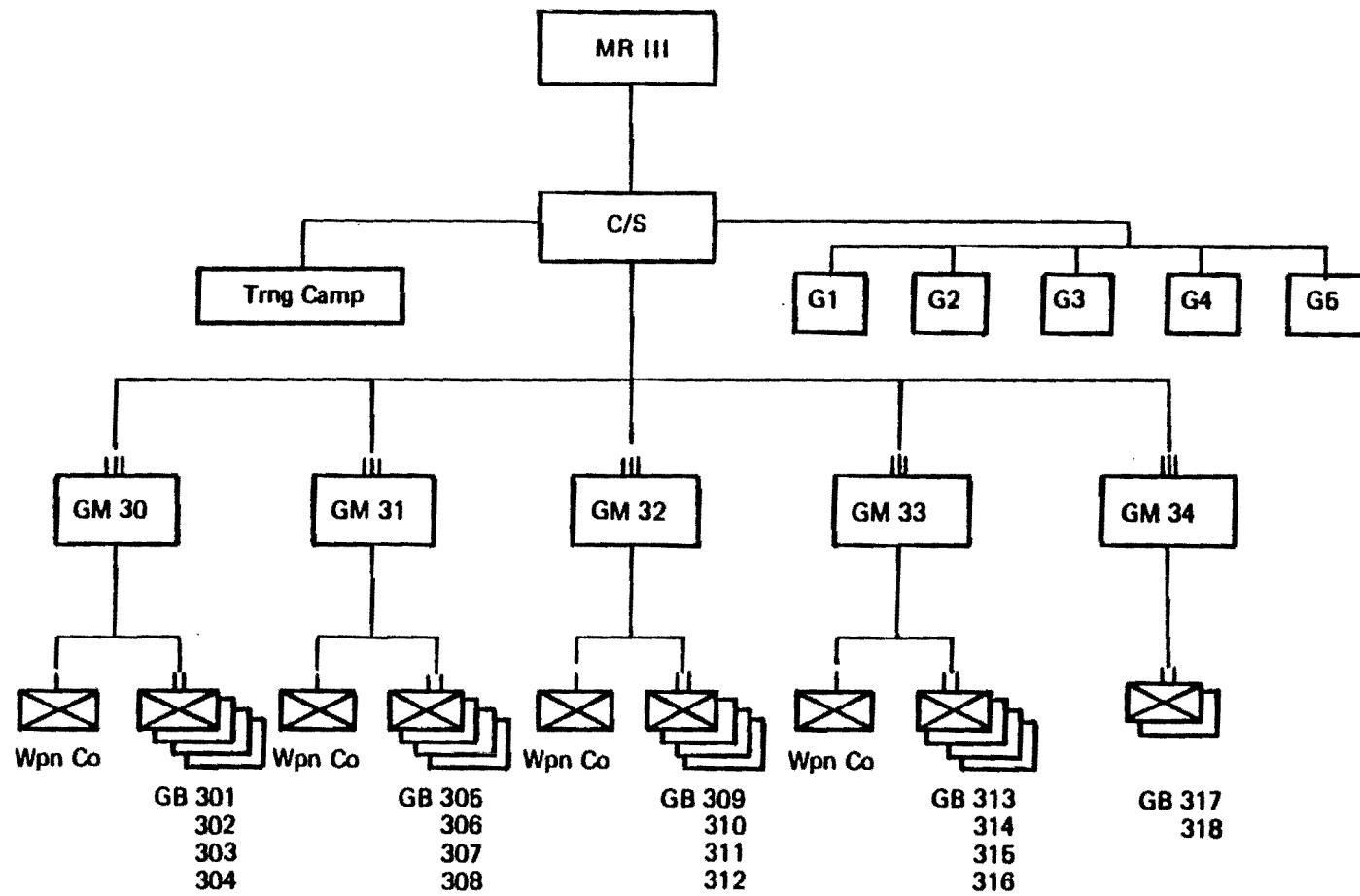


Chart 5 – Organization of Irregular Forces in Military Region III After 1970

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER III

The Initiation of Conventional Warfare in Southern Laos

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

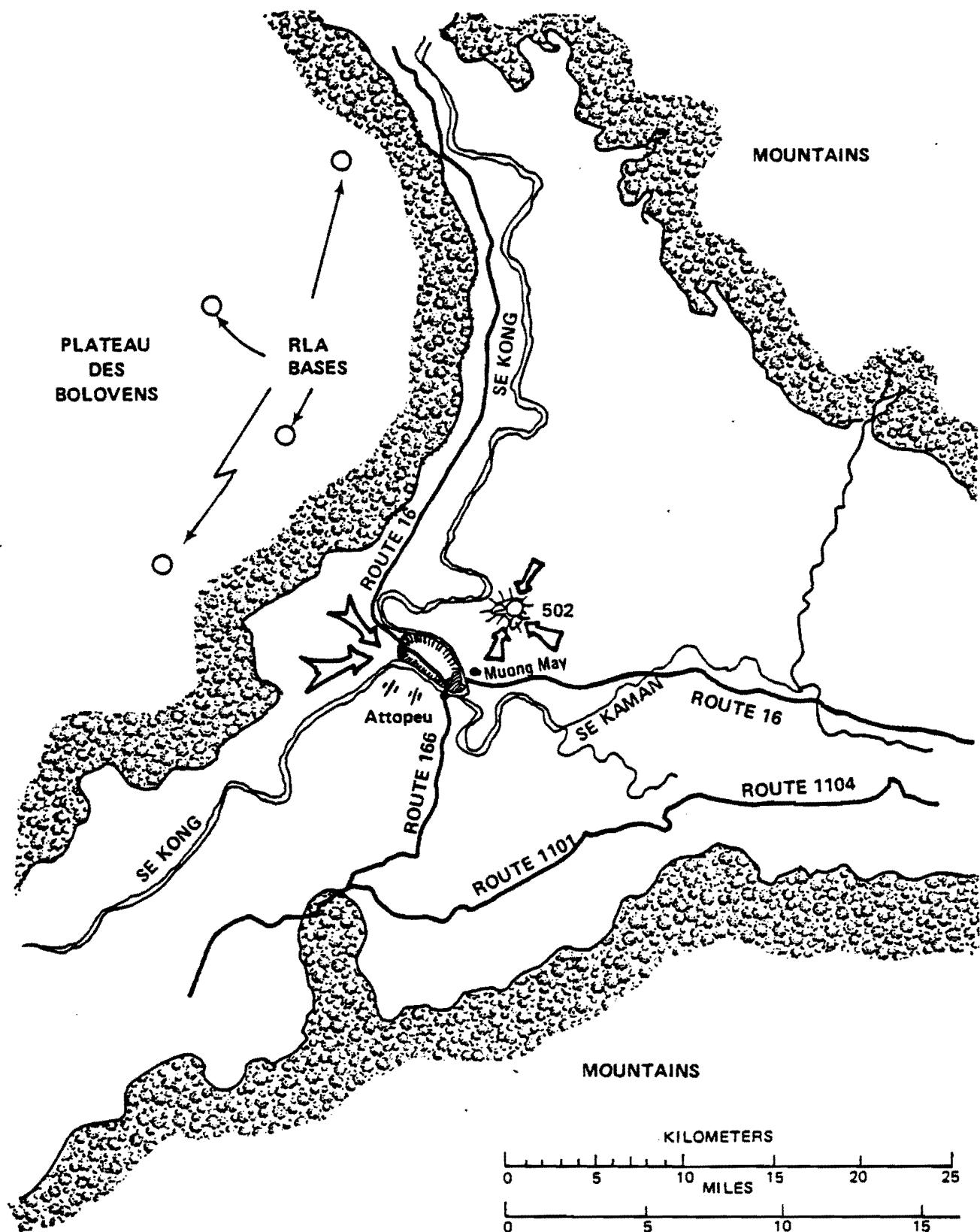
Despite the full weight of American bombing operations, Ho Chi Minh trail truck traffic increased day by day and the NVA continued to improve the road network, keeping passages open and making roads suitable for high-speed traffic. They also took all steps possible to reduce the effectiveness of US bombing.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

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

Attopeu

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

Map 10 – The Battle of Attopeu



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

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

Saravane

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tchepone

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER IV

The NVA Panhandle Offensives of 1971 and 1972

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

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

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

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

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

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

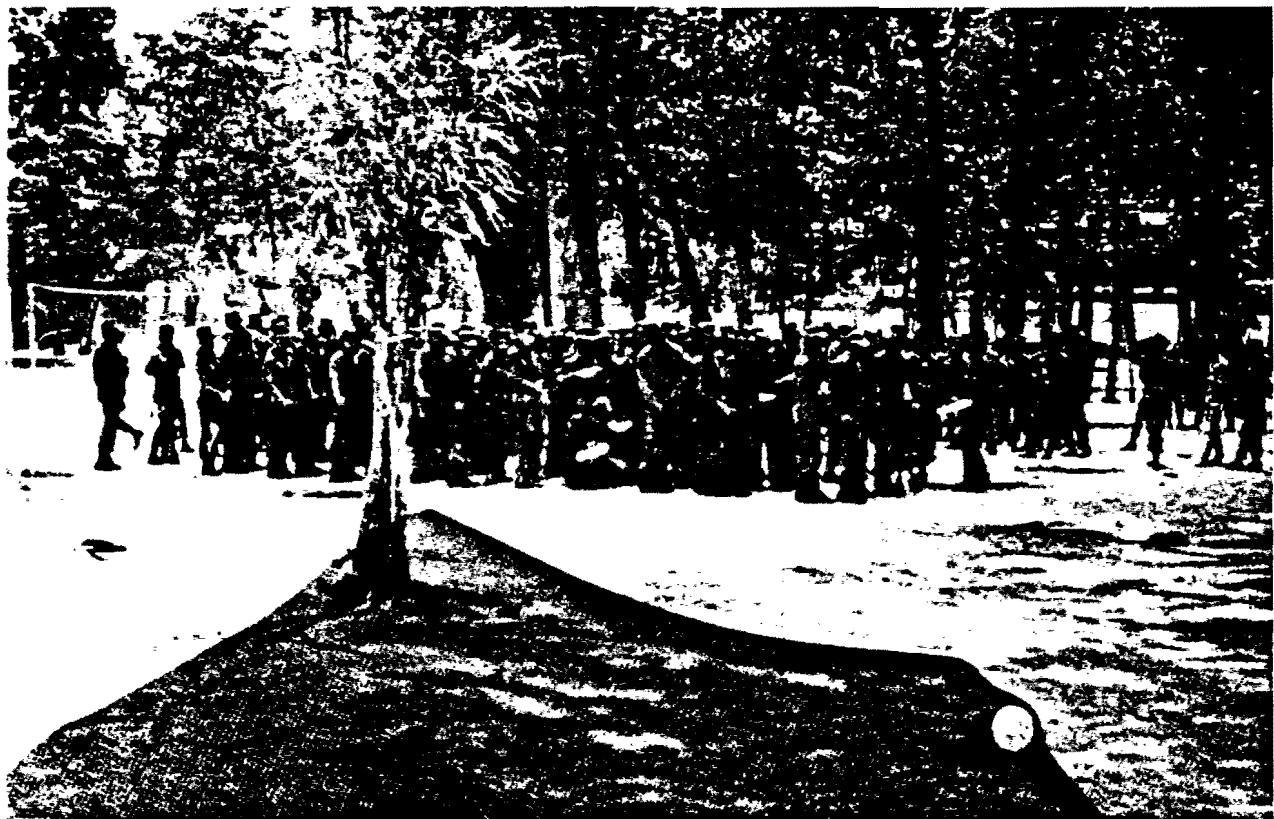
Americans that it was even under attack until the withdrawal took place. A desultory effort to get the troops to go back into the defensive positions was unsuccessful; thus, the fall of the Bolovens Plateau began without a battle.

Paksong and Route 23

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

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

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



Troops of BV 44 Assemble in the Saravane Area

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

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

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

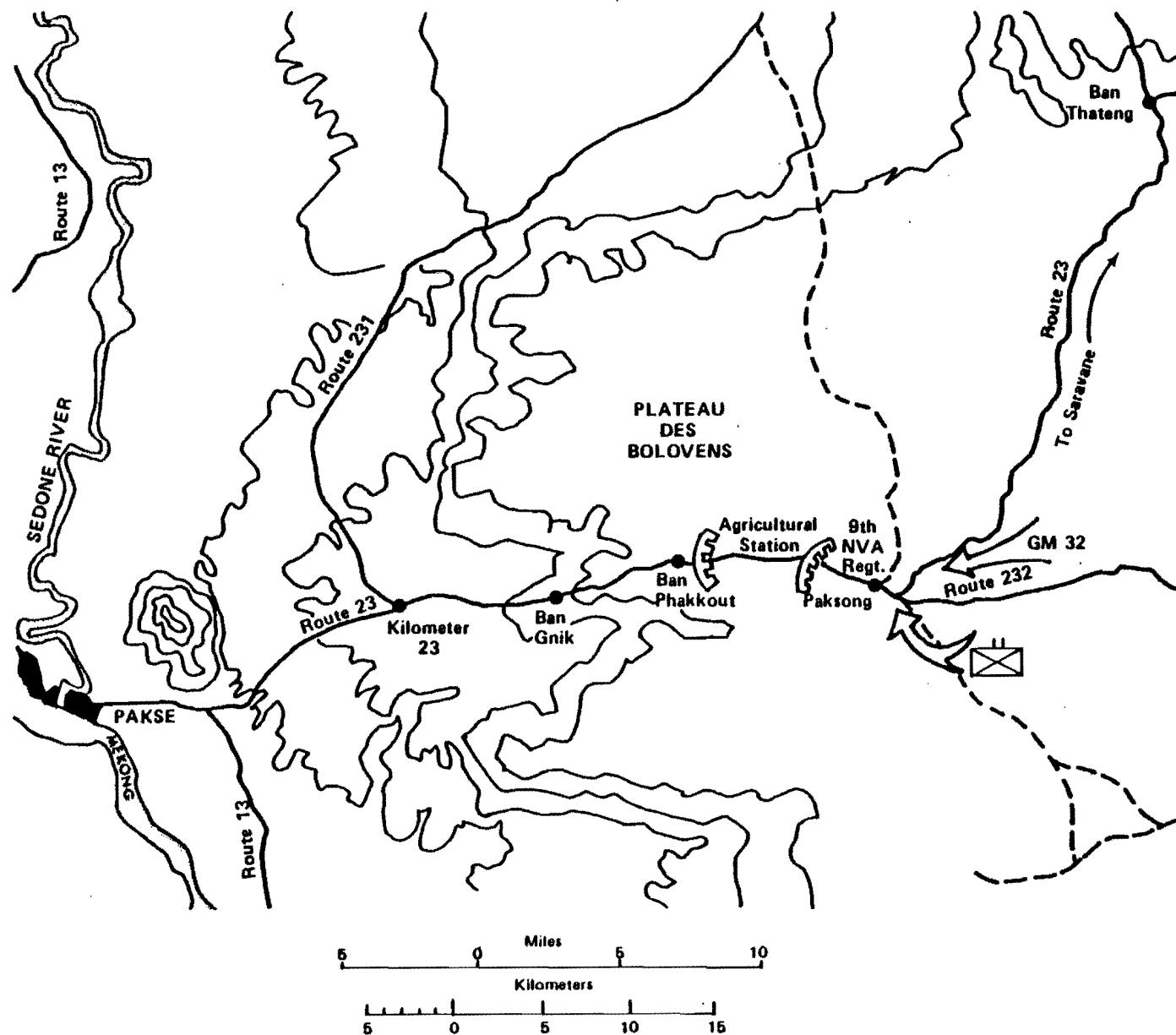
The Lao military structure in MR IV was almost totally destroyed in the series of battles between Paksong and kilometer 23. Seven RLA infantry battalions, two Neutralist battalions, and almost all of the irregular forces were so shattered that they had to be considered combat ineffective. It was then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

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

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

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

Map 11 – The Battle of Paksong



Reorganization

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

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

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

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

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

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

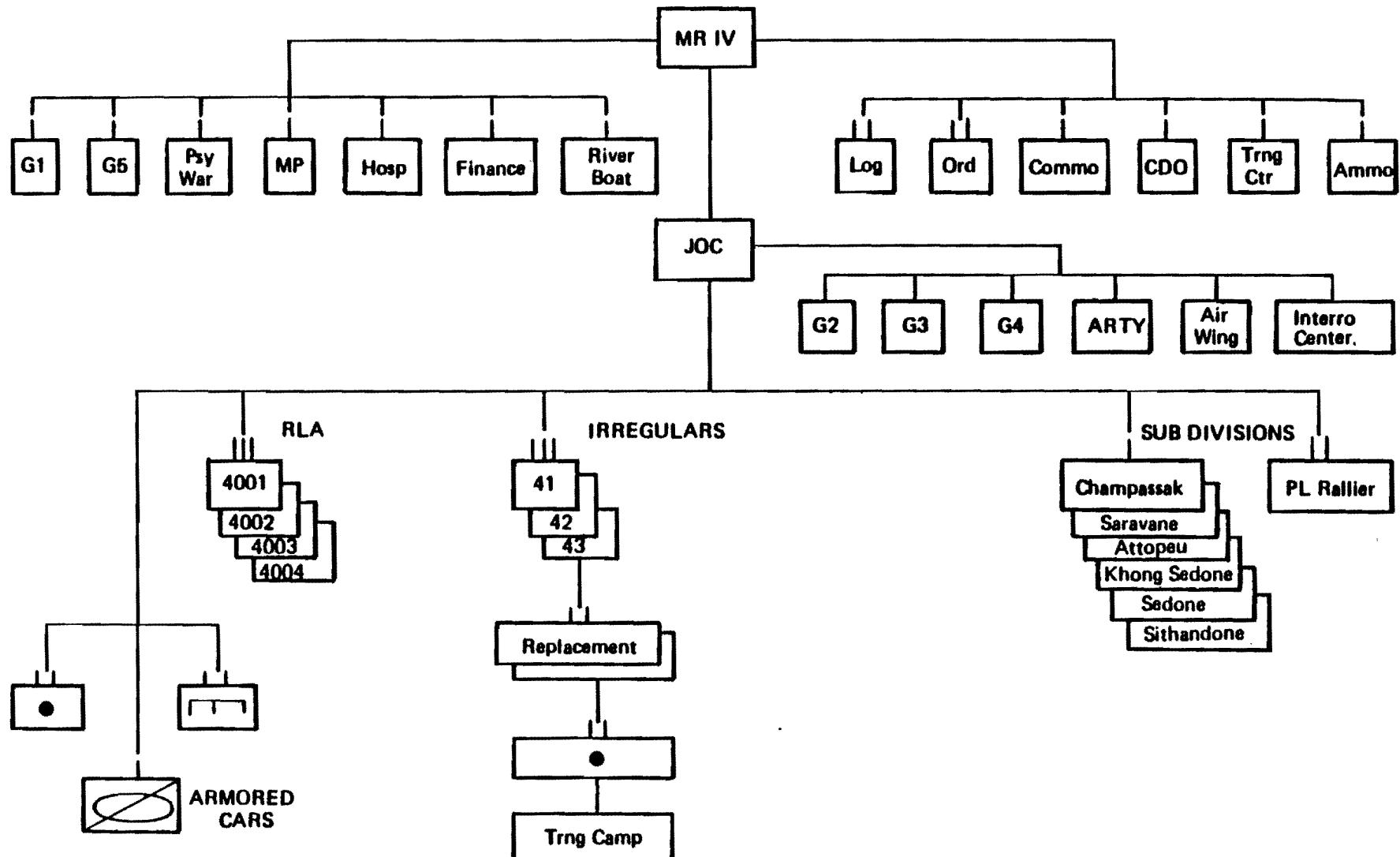
developed and installed that could coordinate the many actions in MR IV in a coherent manner. (Chart 6) To accomplish this, a tactical operations center (TOC) was opened with trained tactical air controllers on duty 24 hours a day. The MR IV staff was reshuffled to provide a streamlined G-2/G-3 section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

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

Saravane

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

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



the NVA 39th Regiment. Seizing some defensible terrain, the GM dug in and held its ground. Two days later, GM 41 took the NVA completely by surprise by air-assaulting on the northern edge of the town. (Map 12) The soldiers of GM 41 and their commander were natives of this province and they knew the terrain very well. They moved quickly into Saravane, eliminating a battalion of NVA troops on the way. Within a week, the two GMs were in complete control of the Saravane area.

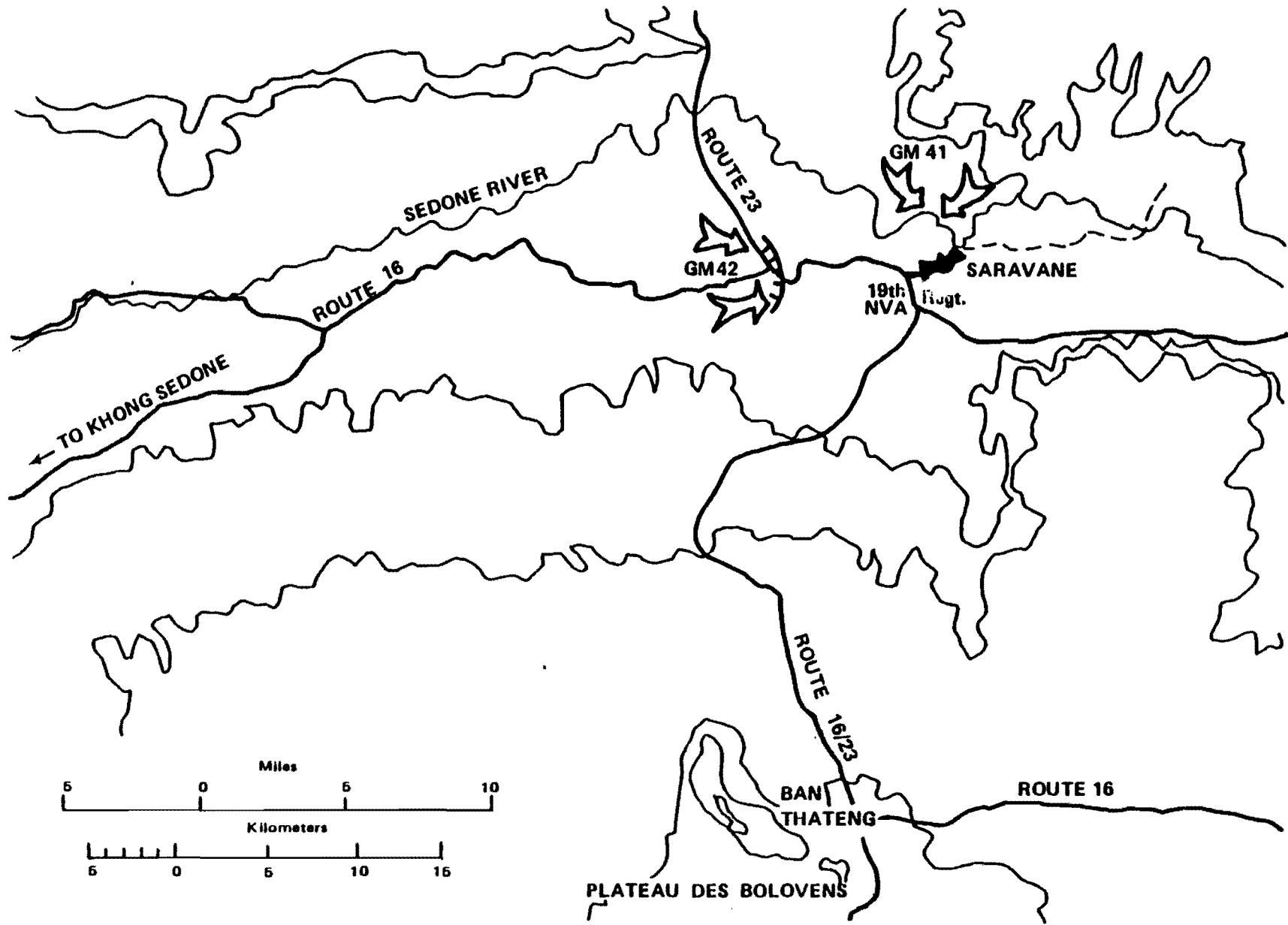
Because Saravane was a key junction of the Ho Chi Minh trail, the NVA could not allow this situation to prevail. Using heavy artillery support and dense anti-aircraft fire that denied effective close air support and air resupply, three regiments of NVA regular infantry counterattacked. After more than a month of heavy combat, the two irregular GMs had to be withdrawn, but they had accomplished their mission and had provided more time for the reorganization of forces in MR IV.

During the time GM 41 was at Saravane, the American leadership in Saigon and Vientiane were planning to deal a telling blow to the Communist support structure northeast of the Bolovens Plateau. Intelligence reported the formation of a major North Vietnamese support facility, Binh Tram 37, in the area between Ban Thateng, north of Paksong, and the eastern edge of the Bolovens. The initial objective of GM 41 in Saravane was to buy time for the reorganizations proceeding in MR IV, but this objective was expanded, at the urging of the Americans, who saw an opportunity to find and destroy Binh Tram 37.

An element of GM 41 was air-landed on top of the hill which overlooked Ban Thateng and the valley to the east. One battalion of GM 41 began a drive from Saravane, south toward Ban Thateng. GM 33 was air-lifted into the eastern area of the valley and began to drive toward Ban Thateng. In the planning stages of this operation, there was never any intent to hold ground or spend any length of time in the objective area. GM 33 was to air-land, with the elements of GM 41 providing fire support from the fire support base established on top of the mountain, while the other battalion from GM 41 was to serve as a diversion and to provide an escape route for GM 33 and the troops manning the small fire support base. GM 33 was initially very successful, uncovering several trucks, several rice storage areas and ammunition dumps, all of which were destroyed.

Map 12 – The Battle of Saravane

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NVA Ammunition Truck Destroyed by Air Attack
in Support of the Saravane Operation

The GM continued its rapid movement to the west through the valley with minimum casualties, overlooked on both sides by the North Vietnamese who controlled the high ground. It became obvious that Binh Tram 37 was not in the valley, although it was equally obvious that a branch of this Binh Tram was in process of being established when disrupted by GM 33. Unfortunately, the American fixation on uncovering this Binh Tram and American intelligence insistence that it was there, led to new orders which directed the GM to retrace its steps to the east and begin a systematic search of a large swampy area to the north of the small village of Lao Ngam, off the northeastern edge of the Bolovens. Despite a concentrated search of eight days however, no further trace of the Binh Tram was discovered. Meanwhile, the North Vietnamese began to react to the GM 41 presence near Ban Thateng and exerted considerable pressure. GM 33 escaped through the blocking positions of GM 41 just before the battalion manning the blocking positions was overrun along with the fire base. The major lesson learned from this operation was to never let hopes exceed common sense; in this case, common sense dictated the early extraction of GM 33 according to plan to prevent major losses. The loss of the battalion from GM 41 contributed to the rapidly deteriorating situation at Saravane which may have been forestalled had the battalion at Ban Thateng been able to escape relatively unharmed.

A lesson never really learned was that the Lao irregulars were excellent in rapid raid and destroy missions but were neither armed nor trained to face the major NVA combat formations. With the Lao irregulars, it was better to make your impact as large and as quick as possible then withdraw or delay before the NVA could bring to bear its full combat potential. The rapidity with which the irregulars could be employed versus the rather ponderous, slow-moving combat formations of the NVA was never fully exploited. A GM was committed, did well initially, then was left too long in the false hope that it would be able to stand up to the superior firepower and strength of the NVA. In retrospect, it would probably have been better to trade territory to the NVA for the flexibility which combat-effective irregular GMs provided. With these GMs it was possible to strike anywhere in MR IV, force the NVA to deploy

to meet the threat, then withdraw before engaging in decisive combat which the irregulars could never win. This tactic, although much discussed, was never implemented, primarily because of the continuing hope that the GMs would be able to hold the ground they seized so easily. Political considerations, of course, made it hard for the Lao to give up territory without a fight. A recaptured population center (or, more properly, a former population center) became a symbol the Lao political structure in Vientiane could not give up without a struggle. A lesson learned from this is that political and military officials should agree in advance on objectives which could realistically be achieved, then stick to these objectives regardless of temptations. Modifications must be based on facts rather than hopes.

Responding to the capability of the South Vietnamese to interdict the Ho Chi Minh trail in force, demonstrated at Tchepone in February 1971, and to the newly experienced fighting strength of the Lao irregulars, the NVA heavily reinforced in the panhandle during this period. Replacements were infiltrated until all three regiments of the 968th Division were at full strength and reports of heavy artillery, 85-mm, 122-mm and 130-mm field guns, began to filter into MR IV from various road watch teams. Unfortunately, like the reports of enemy armor prior to the attack on Paksong this intelligence was generally disregarded by the Lao leadership in Vientiane and like the reports of the enemy armor, this failure was to prove costly. Vientiane generally disregarded the reports because new heavy artillery would mean "widening the war" and Vientiane clung to the belief that the North Vietnamese still had some respect for the 1962 accords and would not introduce new weapons. The Communists were to prove this assumption totally wrong on numerous occasions.

During this interval, the battle of Paksong shifted back and forth. The Communists recaptured it in December 1971, as related below, when the Neutralist troops withdrew after the two battalions deserted their positions around the two mountains to the west of Paksong. The Neutralists blamed each other for the withdrawal, but the fact is that they withdrew

without orders and in the face of almost no pressure. This started another exodus down Route 23 toward Pakse and GM 42 was placed in defensive positions at kilometer 28 with orders to halt the advance. The GM held in the face of repeated Communist assaults and while subjected to heavy mortar and artillery fire. When the GM was finally withdrawn, it had lost over half its original strength and was never again to regain the state of combat effectiveness which it demonstrated in this campaign. Although it performed remarkably well in the capture of Saravane late in 1973, it never recovered from the casualties suffered in the battles at kilometer 28.

Khong Sedone

As mentioned earlier in connection with the ebb and flow of NVA forces at Saravane, Khong Sedone had become the refuge of citizens escaping from Saravane as well as the administrative center for Saravane Province. More important, however, from a strategic point of view, it was on the west bank of the Sedone River, at the junction of National Routes 13 and 16, only 15 miles east of the Thai border and 40 miles north of the region headquarters at Pakse. If the Communists could seize and hold Khong Sedone, they would effectively isolate Military Region IV from the rest of the country. This is exactly what they tried to do; the first time was in January 1972.

Surprised and overwhelmed by the weight of the NVA assault, the RLA garrison at Khong Sedone had withdrawn as the NVA 39th Regiment invaded the town. The Communist were not permitted to remain, however. Borrowing GM 32 from Savannakhet, MR IV counterattacked and recaptured Khong Sedone in February. The defense of Khong Sedone was then turned over to GM 4001 which put one of its battalions, BV 44 in the main defensive position.

In early July, the NVA struck Khong Sedone again. A heavy artillery and rocket bombardment preceded the infantry assault that took BV 44 by surprise at 0530 hours. The battalion was quickly routed by the NVA attack and the Communists gained control of the town. When I learned

of the hasty withdrawal of BV 44, I realized that the battalion would have to be reorganized before it could counterattack. I sent it a new battalion commander, relieving the old one who was a hold-over from Phasouk's regime, and ordered it to retake Khong Sedone. Its attempt, poorly supported by only one four-gun battery of 105s, failed. It was obvious that the NVA, with heavier and longer range artillery, were beyond the capability of BV 44. The only other unit I had immediately available was GM 41. It was retraining at PS-18 where it had just been rotated from the delaying actions at Saravane in a very poor state of combat effectiveness. Although we tried an airmobile envelopment in favor of another frontal attack, the GM was also unable to crack the hastily established Communist defenses at Khong Sedone. I eventually had to withdraw it before it was completely destroyed.

The NVA 39th Regiment established some strong defenses at Khong Sedone that were amply supported by artillery. We, at MR IV, knew that the longer we permitted it to remain, the tougher its defenses would become.

With GM 4001 providing route security and protecting the artillery south of Khong Sedone, we again called upon GMs 32 and 33 from MR III to retake the town. On 20 July, GM 32 air-assaulted from USAF CH-53s northeast of Khong Sedone and Ban Nakadao. Meanwhile, GM 33 landed northwest of the town with its four battalions and attacked south, its left boundary (with GM 32) was Route 13 and its objective was the high ground west of Khong Sedone. (Map 13)

GM 32 attacked with two battalions generally along Route 13; the other two battalions followed the Sedone River into the town. After a week of heavy fighting, GM 32 forced its way into Khong Sedone, capturing nine soldiers of the NVA 39th Regiment along the way. Its attack was well supported by artillery and air strikes.

GM 33, the right arm of the attack, ran into heavier resistance and had more difficult terrain to traverse. Nevertheless, by mid-August, it too had accomplished its mission. GM 4001, advancing from the south, was also slowed by the enemy resistance as well as by the August rains that made movement on the slippery roads and trails very difficult.

This battle of Khong Sedone destroyed almost half of the NVA 39th Regiment, as well as a good part of the NVA 19th Regiment, including its commander. In its withdrawal, the NVA left behind large quantities of weapons, including one 122-mm howitzer, a 122-mm field-gun, a 75-mm gun and a 37-mm anti-aircraft gun.

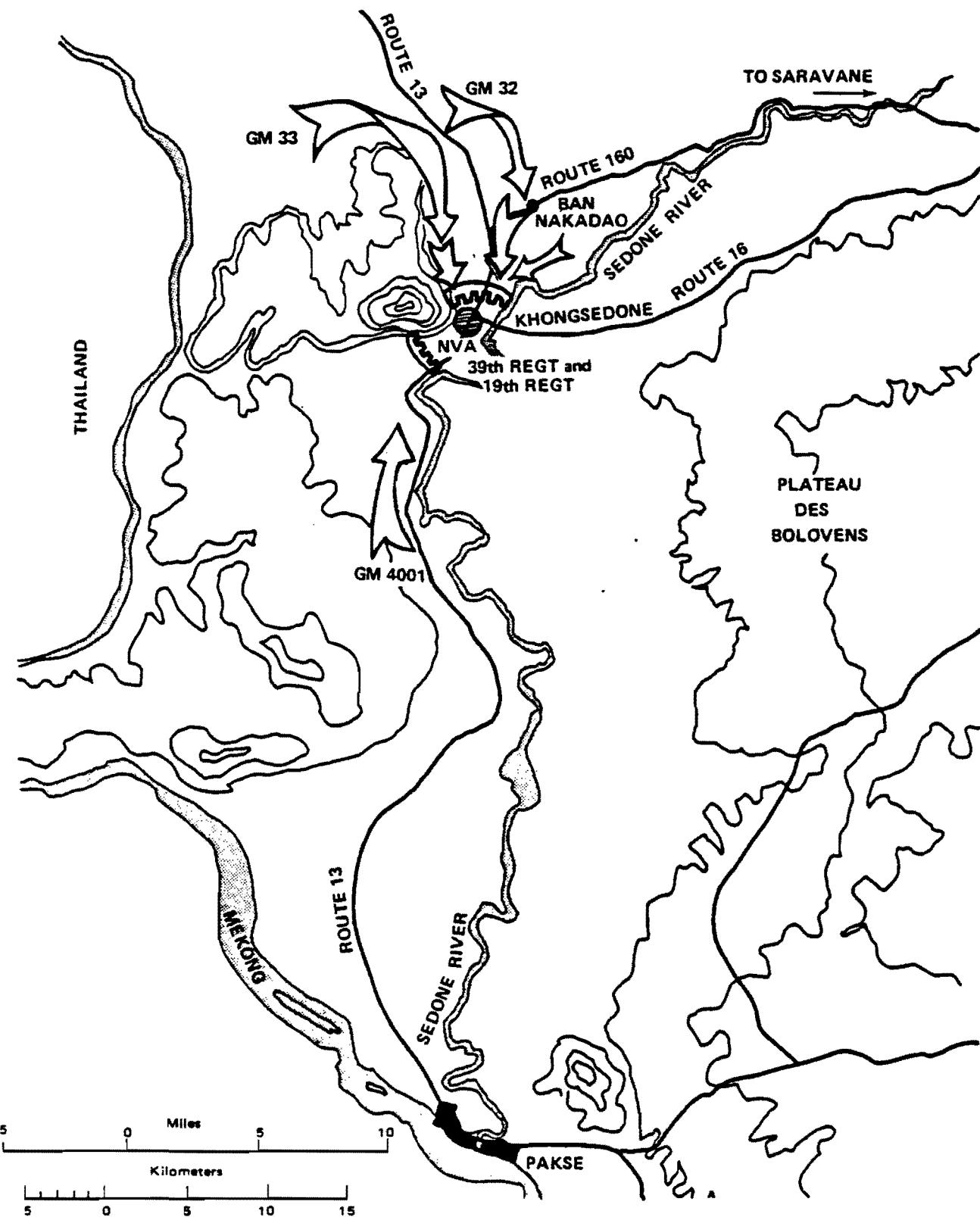
An interesting sidelight of this battle was the effort devoted to securing a USAF CH-53 which had been damaged during landing. One battalion from GM 42 was pulled from its training mission to defend the helicopter until it could be extracted by the USAF. Ten days later the helicopter was extracted relatively unharmed, while the battalion had suffered over 100 casualties protecting it; a rather remarkable expenditure of manpower at a time when manpower had become a most critical resource.

Saravane Again and the Approach of Cease-Fire

Following the recapture of Khong Sedone the two irregular GMs withdrew to MR III and the defense of Khong Sedone was left to the regulars. At this time, rumors of a cease-fire became more pronounced and, on orders from Vientiane, I developed a plan to make one last big effort which could result in the seizure of both Paksong and Saravane, major political objectives in the event of any cease-fire. I would launch an all-out effort to seize these cities and hold them until a cease-fire was negotiated. The plan called for air-landing two irregular GMs near Saravane, and one irregular GM near Lao Ngam on the northwest-southeast axis, halfway between Paksong and Khong Sedone. Two regular GMs would be in reserve along with the newly formed GM 43 which although as yet untested in sustained combat, had acquitted itself very well in actions near Pakse.

This operation was developed and coordinated over a one month period. During this time, the North Vietnamese also were regrouping. The 19th and 39th Infantry Regiments were reconstituted; then in October 1972, the North Vietnamese launched attacks against Khong Sedone and again recaptured the city, their assault infantry swimming the flooded Sedone River at night. This left MR IV faced with a critical decision.

Map 13 – The Battle of Khong Sedone



The planning for the major offensive had been completed and the units involved were in various stages of preparation for the attack on Saravane. I decided that the operation would continue with a regular GM being given the mission of recapturing Khong Sedone. Although this reduced the reserves immediately available to support the operation, the potential gains were worth the risk.

With this decision, GM 42 was air-landed near the Saravane air-strip, unfortunately near the training area for the 39th Infantry Regiment. After considerable difficulty, half of the GM was landed and secured the airstrip. By the time the strip was secure however, all of the USAF helicopters taking part had been hit and were unable to continue. Fortunately, Air America was able to continue the lift until the entire GM was in the landing zone, but with the loss of the helicopters, the air-lift of GM 41 was not accomplished on the following day as planned. GM 42 was ordered to move to the northwest of Saravane and locate and secure a landing strip for GM 41. This they did after several days of searching. Finally, GM 41 was inserted and the attack on Saravane began. The delay in the airlift of GM 41 had enabled the North Vietnamese to regroup and the two GMs faced considerable resistance before finally capturing the city. Simultaneous with this airlift, the GM attacking Khong Sedone was able to push into the city aided by the diversion provided by the Saravane operation.

To further complicate the problems of the NVA at Paksong and Khong Sedone, GM 33 was successfully air-landed into the Lao Ngam area and began search and destroy operations. Shortly after it was inserted, it succeeded in destroying five and damaging another three tanks, putting a severe dent in the armor threat in MR IV. These tanks were destroyed in an ingeniously devised ambush by the GM commander using antitank mines, 3.5-inch rocket launchers and LAW. This victory over the Communist armor represented the single most successful Lao operation against armor in the entire war.

As events later unfolded, it would have been better to have delayed

the attacks. Their principal objective was the securing of as much territory as possible before a cease-fire. The attacks were made with the knowledge that the irregulars would not be able to hold the ground for any sustained period. The negotiations dragged on for six months before they were finally signed in February 1973. By the time the cease-fire was signed, all of the population centers captured in these attacks were back in North Vietnamese hands.

Throughout these campaigns, the Pathet Lao posed absolutely no threat in MR IV. Had it been a case of the Neutralists and Rightists against the Pathet Lao, no territory would have been lost to the Communists.

After initial successes in all phases of the operation, the forces involved began to construct defenses in preparation for the coming North Vietnamese counteroffensive. The counteroffensive began to materialize in late November 1972 when the NVA 9th Infantry Regiment was redeployed north from the Paksong area and committed against GMs 41 and 42 at Saravane. Despite this move, the GMs held their ground, although Communist artillery fire was becoming increasingly heavy. In one attack, GM 41 headquarters suffered a direct hit by a 122-mm field gun round which completely demolished the command post, killing all except the GM commander who escaped unscathed.

Fortunately for the irregulars, just when the NVA attacks were becoming more severe, the intensified U.S. bombing of North Vietnam was going on and North Vietnamese morale was noticeably lowered. Also, during this time increasing numbers of USAF strike sorties were being made available to MR IV. These factors served to sustain the irregulars through December 1972 and into January 1973, but by this time the North Vietnamese had massed sufficient force to overrun Saravane and GM 43 was committed to save the situation. Almost as soon as it was committed it uncovered what was to be the largest NVA ammunition cache yet discovered in the war, near where Route 23 crossed the Sedone River to the west of Saravane. Two B-52 strikes were later employed to destroy this ammunition dump when the limited resources of the irregulars were unable to do the job and increasing strong North Vietnamese pressure forced

the GM to continue toward Saravane.

Just as the battered GMs 41 and 42 were being gathered for a coordinated attack to recapture Saravane again in early February 1973, GM 43 bumped into the newly committed 101st NVA Regiment south of Saravane. Confusion in air support resulted in the Communist attack dispersing the GM and the attack against Saravane never materialized. The confusion resulted when I, as the MR IV commander, realizing the dire straits of GM 43, called a tactical emergency in order to divert sufficient air, both RLAF and USAF, to save GM 43. Unfortunately, the FAC overhead had an inexperienced backseater and never realized what was going on, while an American, also unfamiliar with the situation, cancelled the tactical emergency and sufficient air support did not result at the critical time. By the time a more experienced FAC could be sent to the area and air support again requested, the GM had been overrun. The failure of the attack against Saravane and the resulting loss of one GM can be directly attributed to the poor communications between an inexperienced FAC and his back-seater, and to an inexperienced individual making the wrong decision at the most critical time. The lesson learned in this exercise was that the MR commander must have absolute control of his forces and their support, otherwise disaster can result.

With this event the battle for Saravane was lost. The only remaining option was to deploy the battered GMs in a delaying action to the west of Saravane in an effort to keep the enemy as far from Khong Sedone as possible. This was done and the GMs were able to hold the Communists 19 kilometers to the east of Khong Sedone at the end of the war.

Although the operations against Khong Sedone, Paksong, Saravane and Lao Ngam had been launched with high hopes, the real objectives of the operations were not realized. In retrospect, a later launch date for the operations may have achieved better results. It is also possible that the NVA were at the same time preparing for a final assault on Pakse and that the friendly forces would have been tied up just defending Pakse and more territory would have been lost by the end of the war. In any event, the operations restored Khong Sedone to RLA

control and kept the North Vietnamese away from Pakse itself, a major accomplishment.

In the last two years of heavy fighting in Laos, 1971 and 1972, fierce and costly battles were fought for control of the terrain along the western edge of the panhandle as the NVA sought to secure this extension of its logistical system. Although several key positions changed hands more than once during these months, the NVA control of

the corridor from Saravane to Attopeu was firm as the cease-fire approached. Furthermore, despite great efforts and sacrifices by Laos forces, Paksong, in the heart of the Bolovens Plateau was in enemy hands.