

CHAPTER V

Developments Following the February 1973 Cease-Fire

Agreement to Restore Peace and Achieve National Concord

After long and difficult discussions between the RLG and the Pathet Lao representatives, an agreement to end the war was reached on February 21, 1973, and after agreement on protocols it was officially signed on September 14, 1973 in Vientiane. (*Appendix A and B*) This brought about a state of jubilation among the Laotians and their neighboring countries who shared their feelings because they all thought it meant the country would now be able to live in peace.

As far as the ruling government was concerned, it meant long hours of hard work. First, a coalition was formed in Vientiane with hopes that a system of government based on the principles of democracy would evolve. A new joint national political council was assembled in the capital of Luang Prabang to write a new constitution with new laws and regulations to replace the existing constitution which had been written in the early colonial days. Like the council of government that had formed in Vientiane, the coalition was comprised of 16 members from each side of the elected government, and 10 members from the "non-political" group. These latter representatives were to be nationalists without previous records of participation with the Communists. The political council's main mission was to solve the economic and other problems that faced the country, taking the place of the old national assembly.

After the Vientiane agreement and protocols were signed, there was a great urge to bring about a state of unity between the two cities of

Vientiane and Luang Prabang and to work together to build a neutral country. A joint police force was formed, chosen in equal numbers from the two sides. Another joint force was formed to provide protection for members of the coalition government and the political council. As the Pathet Lao had no police force of its own, its military force was allowed to be its component of the police force.

One of the main concerns after the cease-fire was that the fighting still continued. Orders had been issued from the high commands of both sides that all fighting was over and units were to remain in position until further notice. A mixed commission was put into operation to help avoid confrontations. It was very interesting and, needless to say, a surprise to us to learn from the Pathet Lao that they had never had the NVA on their side. In any case, after the cease-fire the fighting that continued was caused by the NVA units still in Laos; many North Vietnamese prisoners were caught during this period of time. Finally, an agreement was negotiated that made us hopeful that all the foreign troops would be withdrawn from Laos immediately.

The signing of the Agreement for the Restoration of Peace and Reconciliation in Laos on 21 February 1973 made the right-wing Lao political group and the Army's high ranking officers supporting the rightist ideology angry with the prime minister, Prince Souvannaphouma, who had put severe pressure on the government delegations, political and military, to force acceptance of the Pathet Lao final proposal. The Rightists had the same feeling toward some U. S. Embassy authorities who had pressured them by saying that no support or aid of any kind would be provided by the U. S. to the RLG if the Pathet Lao proposal was not accepted. For the rightwing group, the signing of that document constituted an act of surrender to the Pathet Lao. The Rightists had fought for many years to free the country from occupation by NVA which had supported the Pathet Lao since the end of World War II. They understood clearly the North Vietnamese goal and could anticipate what would happen next. Furthermore, some of the members of the government, as well as some ranking army officers, were among the leaders of the independence movement in Laos since 1944, some of them even before the surrender of the Imperial Japanese Forces. They

considered themselves the true Lao nationalists and deplored the agreement that would perpetuate North Vietnam's control over Laotian affairs.

But Souvannaphouma and the American Ambassador, Charles Whitehouse, told us that the Pathet Lao would respect the cease-fire and insist only on the dissolution of the irregular forces maintained, through American support, by the RLG. But this was not the case. Immediately following the cease-fire, the PL began working toward the complete elimination of both the regular and irregular forces of the RLG.

To the Pathet Lao, with the political agreement in hand, the next step was to implement it without delay. Behind the bamboo curtain, every means to exploit every clause to Pathet Lao advantage was carefully prepared; all political cadres were trained in North Vietnam before being dispatched to our zone. Their troops were mainly recruited from the minorities and they had received their political indoctrination partly in North Vietnam and partly in the Pathet Lao occupied areas while the discussion on the protocols of the agreement was going on in Vientiane. On the government side, we believed that time was working to our advantage, while the other side believed the same. They needed enough time for indoctrination of their troops and to receive materiel from the supporting allies.

The agreement was widely discussed at all levels of society, from the morning market fish sellers, the tricycle drivers, up to the high ranking civil servants, each of them drawing their own conclusions as to how the situation would or should be resolved. Many who had relatives on the Pathet Lao side were trying to get in touch with them because if the Pathet Lao became stronger and took control of the country, they might be supported by these relatives. Another group of civil servants, who were not satisfied with the government, hoped to see the Communists come into power so that they could obtain more important posts or higher positions. There were many like that; those who were fired because of corruption or misbehavior, or for lack of capability.

Many political and military leaders in the rightwing group had believed that the prime minister, politically the head of the Neutralists, would be their leader, particularly since Prince Boun Oum and General Phoumi Nosavan had released their hold of the rightwing command. The leader next in line

was Mr. Leuam Insixiengmay, a permanent member of the government, but he had proved himself too weak to face the mounting struggle with the Pathet Lao so, after discussions, the rightwing leaders agreed to let Souvannaphouma head them politically.

This rightwing support gave him the power he needed to execute his unity and neutralism policy. He first exercised this power by filling the joint national political council of 42 members; 16 from the government side, 16 from the Pathet Lao, and 10 from the country's qualified elements appointed by both sides. Of course, the 16 members to be chosen from the government side had to be very strong supporters of his neutralism. Unfortunately, those selected either had negative viewpoints or were old and out of all political activities with no sense of national policy.

Adding to the problem for the rightwing, among the 10 members to be chosen from "qualified people" were trouble makers who had initiated demonstrations against the constitutional institutions, the national assembly, those who proclaimed Souvannaphouma as the father of neutralism, and included members of the civil service who for various reasons were not satisfied with their positions and leaned toward the Pathet Lao movement. In the same council, the appointment of the vice president along with his nephew gave a clear picture of the political game the prince was playing. Souvannaphouma was a very experienced and wise politician, and he knew how to manage the game. Even before and right after the agreement was signed, his personal staff spread the word that in the forthcoming coalition government, the prince was looking for a younger generation; young men to devote and associate themselves to genuine neutralism and to support him as the one and only father of that policy. This was enough to excite all the young group who called themselves "educated" because they had graduated from French colleges and universities. Among them were those who had acted as representatives of the Communists students' "quartier latin" in Paris. They had shown their support for the Pathet Lao even while occupying top positions in the government. So a kind of political party of the "educated elements" was formed by the name of "Movement of the Youth Front" consisting of a president who was director of the *Service Geographic*.¹ He had been associated

¹Mr. Chansamone Varavong

with the beginnings of *Lao Issara*, a nationalist movement during the early years of 1944-1945. His father, Mr. Khun One Varavong, was a retired civil servant who had held the position of governor of a southern province and he was not on good terms with Prince Boun Oum, ruler of the area and chief of the rightwing group.

The movement started off smoothly and staff members kept contact with all political parties and influential members, asking for guidance and moral support. Later, one of the members, Dr. Somphou Oudomvilay, was chosen to be in the coalition cabinet as *secrétaire d'état* (deputy state secretary) for economics under a Pathet Lao minister (secretary).² Their ambition was not to stop there. As graduate students from colleges and universities, they believed that it was time for them to have a greater share in the government. Their disruptive activities pleased the Pathet Lao whose goal was to interfere and disorganize the existing administration. Supported by some unsatisfied civil servants in the ministry of post, telegraph and telecommunication, the director for administration publicly denounced his director-general, Mr. Khamleuang Sayarath, for not treating his subordinates well and for incompetency. Being himself a member of the Youth Front, the director-general tried to call on the Front for support, but to no avail because the director of administration, Mr. Satasinh was supported by the pro-Pathet Lao elements in different departments. It was a successful test of power; with Pathet Lao support even a movement against a Youth Front member could succeed. Furthermore, they demonstrated to Souvannaphouma that the Youth Front totally supported his policy and in

²Dr. Somphou Oudomvilay was a well-educated man, having been schooled in France, and he was ambitious. Like so many of the young, educated elite, he was easily convinced that the Pathet Lao wished a true coalition government with shared power and responsibilities and he was eager to become an influential member of the new elite. But like nearly all other non-Communists who sought security and position among the Pathet Lao, his enjoyment of prominence in the government was brief. The Pathet Lao kept him only for as long as they wished to exploit his status as a non-Communist. Eighteen months after assuming office, Dr. Somphou Oudomvilay, removed from office and perceiving that his future was indeed bleak if his very life was not threatened, gathered his family together and silently escaped across the Mekong to safety and freedom in Thailand. He now lives quietly in France.

his view, placed them in an advantageous position for appointments to the joint national political council or other political posts where the prince had full power for selection and appointments.

To all these internal troubles, another even more active and powerful threat came into existence: the Student Federation, a strongly left-inclined organization which openly received economic support from the Pathet Lao and from Communist embassies in Vientiane. While the young "educated group" centered its efforts in the capital city, the Student Federation, besides being very active in Vientiane, had branch organizations in all the important provinces such as Luang Prabang, Thakhek, Savannakhet, and Pakse. The ruling committee members travelled about the country to extend their activities and organize the population in areas where some complaints against the administration had been registered. They used demonstrations to oust some of the city and provincial authorities.

Souvannaphouma had a constitutional problem with regard to the peace agreement. Under the Laos' constitution, any agreement with a foreign country or between the Lao of different groups must be submitted to the national assembly for approval. The prince could not see any possibility that the agreement would be approved by that institution, although the national assembly had asked the government to send the agreement to it for debate. Having no constitutional way to close or abolish the national assembly, Souvannaphouma used the Student Federation, supported by the Pathet Lao civilians and other pro-left movements to demand the permanent closing of the assembly. This tactic succeeded because the mixed police force was powerless to interfere and support the assembly and all army units were restricted to their respective camps. When demonstrations against a government agency occurred, the police were called but took no action. The lack of governmental power and the lack of any rightwing activities discouraged conscientious government civil servants for they knew their own careers could be easily ruined with no protection from any quarter.

What was Souvannaphouma's purpose in creating or permitting all the unrest during his administration? He thought that the rightwing was too powerful politically and militarily, and that the agreement would be

difficult or impossible to implement if a balance of force could not be achieved. The rightwing was not totally prepared for these rampant attacks and belatedly realized that it could not depend on government protection for their political activities.

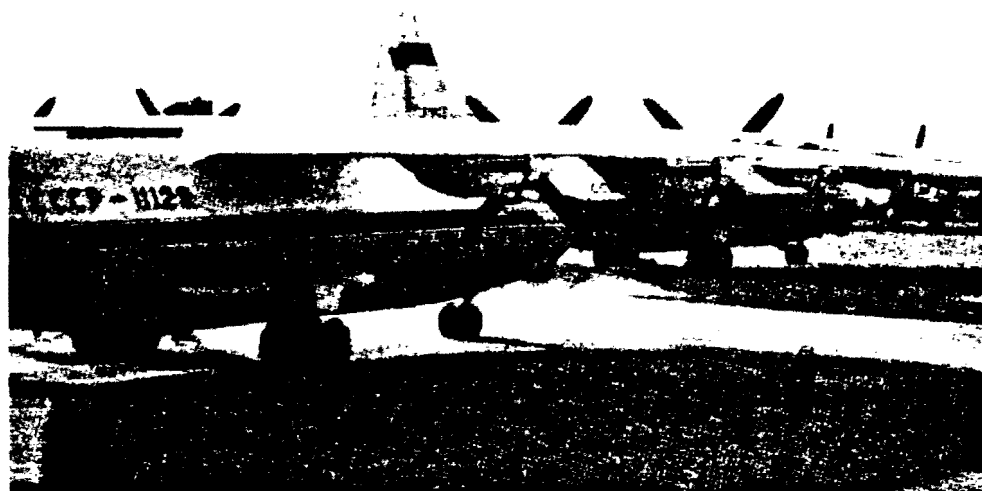
Right after the protocol was signed on 14 September 1973, the first contingent of Pathet Lao troops started to land in Luang Prabang and Vientiane. They were followed by uncounted support material of all kinds, from anti-aircraft weapons down to daily food³. The quantities and types of materiel were exempt from inspection. Prince Souphanouvong, the leader of the Pathet Lao and Souvannaphouma's half brother, had a tacit agreement to this effect with Souvannaphouma. So every time a Pathet Lao unit arrived and the government delegation wanted to check in accordance with the agreement, the Prime Minister always said, "Let's show them that we have a 'big heart'; it doesn't help us to try to control their shipments; on the contrary, it makes them feel that we don't trust them."

Arriving in Vientiane or in Luang Prabang, small groups of well-trained Pathet Lao propagandists started visiting the villages near their camps, going from house-to-house attacking the "US Imperialists," so-called *reactionnaires* and the Sananikone family, while inside of the camps (they had two in Vientiane) a small dispensary was set up to treat sick people or to distribute some routine medicines. This method was used to call the people together for propaganda and indoctrination. They would talk to them about all the bad things the government was doing to them and keep them for hours before distributing the pills. They emphasized that the people would receive better medical treatment when the Pathet Lao came into control of the country. According to the agreement, the Pathet Lao were to share all administrative activities in Vientiane and Luang Prabang; for example, traffic, police, customs, airport regulations. Additionally, each ministry had a Pathet Lao minister or *secretaire d'etat*.

³Russian planes were used to bring the Pathet Lao to the Vientiane airport, while Chinese planes were used to Luang Prabang.



Pathet Lao at Wattay Airport Waiting
to Unload Another Soviet Transport



Soviet Transports Used to Bring the Pathet Lao
into Vientiane at Wattay Airport

In the provincial capitals, where the Pathet Lao military and political cadres were not present, the Student Federation conducted the propaganda activities. They attacked all provincial areas and influential families, criticized the local administration and favoritism, and encouraged the people to demonstrate, calling for replacement of officials by pro-left elements.

In the midst of this unrest, when asked to act to preserve the government, Souvannaphouma always replied:

"There was misconduct among the civilian servants in the administration at the national and local level. I told them again and again to change, to improve themselves, to be responsible to the population; if they don't recognize their mistakes and change their ways to serve the country, one day someone will tell them to do so and it will be too late."

Violations of the Cease-Fire

After the signing of the Vientiane agreement, the main concern of the Pathet Lao was to weaken the Royal Lao Army. The political and propaganda activities of the PL became so widespread throughout the country that the officers of the RLA became alarmed and they felt a military *coup* was imminent. After the PL deployed troops into Vientiane and Luang Prabang, and as the rumors flew that a military *coup* was possible, and further concerned about the presence of the NVA units still in their country, many Rightist leaders, and Prime Minister Souvannaphouma as well, believed that the most important goal was to rid the country of the NVA. Because he trusted his younger half brother, Prince Souphanouvong, the leader of the PL, and considered him to be an honorable member of their royal family, he had no great fear of the PL. But they had both failed to realize that the NVA would take over their country and replace the regime by a People's Republic just as the Communists had done in other parts of the world where they had gained control.

Right after the signing of the cease-fire agreement, all American military personnel and regular and irregular logistical support personnel left Laos. However, the PL, who had constantly declared that

their main concern was to get the foreign troops out of Laos, did not want to discuss the remaining NVA units. They protested that their withdrawal was not subject to any international control, referring to the International Commission of Control which was established by the Geneva Accord, 1954. On the other hand, when the RLG asked the U. S. Government for logistics support, press conferences were held to inform the world of the events.

This situation gave us the opportunity to put pressure on the PL. Some diplomats, favorable to our cause, agreed with the directions we were taking and also advised the NVA to leave the country. Many high ranking officers of the army, as members of the military subcommittee of the Vientiane agreement, met with the prime minister several times asking him to demand the departure of the NVA.

As the discussions on the agreement continued, it was reported that in every PL unit there were NVA soldiers disguised in PL uniforms; others who spoke Laotian left the units to stay among the civilian population, while the NVA main forces had withdrawn from the fighting zones to seek shelter with the PL. As the Pathet Lao continued to bring in their troops, vehicles and food, and all other uncounted and uninspected items, some North Vietnamese military and political cadres were slipping in. The PL also brought in heavy weapons which violated the agreement.

Not only were there violations in Vientiane in which the prime minister showed his favoritism for the PL, but clashes often occurred in the field between the two forces and the results were similar. If the outcome of the fighting was in favor of the PL, our request for an investigation by the government was always delayed or ignored by the prime minister saying, "I will talk about it to Prince Souphanouvong." If, on the other hand, our troops occupied PL ground, commanders at all levels of the army were requested to give an explanation.

As far as the panhandle was concerned, only minor skirmishes marred the cease-fire. In MR IV, we successfully repelled all Pathet Lao attempts to expand its territorial holdings. Meanwhile, the NVA continued its improvements and massive movements along the roads through the panhandle to South Vietnam. For our part, we remained in our garrisons and manned

our outposts while our new government in Vientiane began dismantling our army.

Exploiting the political favoritism they enjoyed from the prime minister, the PL, after occupying the strategic position at Sala Phoukhoun at Routes 7 and 13 between Luang Prabang and Vientiane, were in position to move troops farther south to threaten the government's defenses along the main road leading to the country's capital. There was heavy fighting in this region, but as we could not reinforce our positions because of the prohibition banning all troop movement, we lost critical areas. During the larger scale attacks, our American logistics support counterparts told us that air and artillery ammunition supplies would be provided only if we continued to fight against the PL. The Americans told us this, but our chief of government did not tell us to stand and fight. He wanted to know "if we attacked the PL or were we being attacked by them. Did we have the legal right for defense?" In other words, were the RLA forces really adequately provoked into military action by a PL encroachment or attack?

It was clearly understood by the military that Prime Minister Souvannaphouma had helped bring about our weakened military and political situation by his refusal to take a stand against the Communists at times when it was so necessary.

Reduction of Royal Lao Military Strength

Among the first proposals made by the Pathet Lao at the coalition meeting was to call for a reduction of the military budget. Their reasoning was that Laos was entering into a new political phase of "national concord and reconciliation" and its meager funds should be invested in the reconstruction of the country and not in defense. Their efforts to weaken the RLA were made through the ministries of defense and finance. On the government's side, the ministry of defense had held meetings that kept the army authorities at all levels informed of just what terms were being implemented. Finally notice was sent out that reductions would be forthcoming on a gradual basis. With the approval of the U. S. authorities who were supporting our army, the defense ministry set up a plan to reduce the existing 55,000-man Regular Army and the 38,000-man Irregular Forces

to a combined level of 48,000 or 45,000, to be accomplished in a period of three years. The progress being made in this reduction of the Regular Army was discussed at every staff meeting attended by responsible authorities from all military regions. After numerous meetings the demobilization plans were finally drawn up.

During the planning process it had not been easy for those who recognized what our people had endured during the long war, remembering the fine performance of our troops who had fought with such determination and courage. Furthermore, our problems were made even more difficult by the fact that the PL had begun to use psychological warfare against our soldiers. The Laotians have a proverb that says, "killing the buffaloes after the harvest and the soldiers after the war is bad policy." This proverb offered us some comprehension as to just how difficult our situation actually was during this period of time.

The word "demobilization" was practically never used in this operation for fear it would demoralize our soldiers. But training for and the transfer of people to civilian administration was often mentioned. Special instructions were given to the ministries of education, interior, health, and public works to accept within their respective administrations soldiers released from the army. Positions were offered to all officers wishing to make transfers to these ministries. In the army, the reduction was received by many of the young, intelligent, and well-trained officers as a blessing in disguise. They felt they had more opportunities offered to them in civilian jobs than for promotions in the military service. The senior officers, who had not been afforded the same advantages that were offered to the young officers, felt a sense of insecurity. To hasten the reduction process, the defense ministry encouraged senior army officers to take their retirement early, but promised them it would be on full retirement pension.

If the implementation of the resettlement program presented many problems in the Regular Army, it provoked even more problems for the irregulars. The irregular officers had been detached from the Regular Army to assume civilian positions in the villages such as teaching school and handling administrative positions. Some were the unwanted elements

expelled from the Regular Army and some were foreign mercenaries from the neighboring countries. However, in order to accomplish the program, units of irregulars had to be transferred into the regulars, using the same TOE. To do this, army regulations had to be strictly followed concerning age and nationality. Therefore, the foreign mercenaries were the first to be removed from their units. The second step was to dismiss the "unwanted elements" who had formerly served in the Regular Army but had not qualified for differing reasons. The third step was to dismiss the senior local village chiefs and some of the others who had been released from the army to serve in their villages. There finally remained the duties of the region commanders, under whom all these units had been serving, to submit to the RLA the reorganization plans of their battalions, abiding by the rules and regulations of the RLA TOE.

The Defense Ministry encountered an enormous number of problems in the reduction program of the RLA. Problems arose not only from within the army itself, but also from pressures that came from the Pathet Lao. All through the countryside the PL had spread propaganda against the injustice and ingratitude of the army for dismissing the soldiers after having so badly "used" them. The result of this propaganda was that many of the RLA soldiers started to support the Pathet Lao openly. It was also a major reason for the success of the Pathet Lao propaganda in bringing about a state of unrest among the people.

Finally, after more than one year of implementation the demobilization program was still not completely accomplished, although at least 50 to 60 percent of the troops left the army during this difficult period. GMs were reduced to battalions and the irregular units were integrated into the regular force. The RLA no longer presented any threat to the Ho Chi Minh trail in the panhandle, or anywhere else in Laos, for that matter. The DRV found it possible to deploy major units from Laos to North and South Vietnam. Among the most significant redeployments was the 968th NVA Division from the panhandle to the central highlands of South Vietnam where it participated in the spring offensive of 1975.

When South Vietnam capitulated on 30 April 1975, we in Laos knew that our time was running out. As many as eight thousand more Pathet Lao

troops in civilian clothes, intermingled with disguised NVA soldiers, began infiltrating Vientiane. After a high ranking Rightist official was assassinated, the minister of defense elected to escape into Thailand. This meant that the deputy minister, Kham Oune Bouphe, a Pathet Lao, became the senior defense official. The Communist takeover was accelerating rapidly.

Kham Ouane Bouphe insisted that a complete integration of Pathet Lao and RLA units proceed immediately in Military Regions III and IV. I was still in command in MR IV and I knew that Neutralists and Rightists could not survive with Pathet Lao officers in our units. Nevertheless, Souvannaphouma agreed with the Pathet Lao defense minister, and Pathet Lao battalions began moving into our zones of control, past our outposts and the stakes that had been driven into the ground by mutual agreement and marked the zones under the control of the two sides.

On 18 May, not even three weeks after the fall of South Vietnam, the Pathet Lao battalions marched into the city of Pakse, the site of my region headquarters. At eight o'clock in the morning, battalion after battalion in full battle dress paraded through the streets of my province capital, flanked on each side by rows of civilians, old men, women with babies and children. The Communist troops entered my garrisons and camped alongside my outnumbered, outgunned troops.

Three days later I received orders from Vientiane to report to Chinaimo Army Camp in the capital to attend a seminar on the new government and defense policies. All region commanders, subdivision commanders and regimental commanders were there, as was each region's chief of staff. I was very uneasy during the two-week session in Vientiane as I was being subjected to the strong dose of anti-American, pro-Communist propaganda, but my greatest concern was what was happening to my command at Pakse while I was detained in Vientiane. One of my worst expectations was realized when word reached me that two of my colonels, who happened to be in Souvannaphouma's Neutralist faction, had been arrested by the Pathet Lao.

I immediately went to see Souvannaphouma to protest this illegal act in my command. I pointed out to the prime minister that we could not

work out our differences with the Pathet Lao if they ignored the law and exercised raw power to assume control in regions that were under the authority of duly appointed officers of the RLG. I made it clear that the two colonels were members of his political faction and that he should act immediately to secure their release. I asked him for an order which I would present to the minister of defense that would require him to have my colonels set free.

Souvannaphouma agreed and, with me standing by his desk, took his pen and personally wrote the order. I took the paper and presented it to Kham Ouane Bouppha. He read it, smiled, and said that this matter was of no concern to the prime minister; that it was only an affair to be settled in the military region. In other words, the minister of defense ignored the lawful order of his own prime minister. A cold wave of fear and despair passed over me. It was obvious now that Souvannaphouma could no longer govern. He could not even moderate the excesses the Pathet Lao would bring upon us.

During the second week of the seminar, Kham Ouane Bouppha told us that the new armed forces of Laos would be organized with Pathet Lao soldiers integrated at every echelon, from squad to the general staff, and there would be Pathet Lao commanders at each echelon. Furthermore, all RLA officers, noncommissioned officers and soldiers would report to their units and begin working in the fields, planting and harvesting their own rice, manioc and vegetables to support their units, since there would be no government funds for this purpose.

Our concern for our families and our future became severe, and our morale sank to the depths of despair. I left Vientiane without even paying my final respects to the prime minister and returned to my headquarters at Pakse. There I gathered my family and the few things we could carry with us, returned to Vientiane and escaped across the broad Mekong to Nong Khai, Thailand. My long career as a soldier in the service of my country was over because my army had been reduced to a fragment, then devoured by the Communists in the name of reconciliation and concord.

CHAPTER VI

Observations and Conclusions

Successes and Failures

Although the reduced American commitment and the NVA's determined, reinforced offensive throughout Indochina combined to ultimately defeat Laos, there occurred some major successes during the intensified war period, May 1971 to February 1973, in MR IV. In the midst of the North Vietnamese offensive, we managed a complete reorganization of the regular and irregular forces in the region, creating new organizations and units more suited to meeting the major Communist combat formations. To control these new factors, we completely reorganized the military region staff, constituting a TOC with adequate facilities to fight the major battles in the region. Despite the fact that the irregular GMs could not hold territory in the face of superior NVA firepower and manpower, even Ambassador Whitehouse acknowledged that the defensive operations of the GM 41 near Saravane at the end of the war were unparalleled. This GM absorbed over 60 percent casualties and still remained a viable combat force in the field. GM 42 also sustained extremely high casualties and was still in the field at the end of the war although admittedly less combat effective than GM 41.

Another major success was the defense of the territory in the hands of the RLA at the end of May 1971. Despite Communist efforts in MR IV, they were unable to gain and hold any appreciable territory following their victory at Paksong in May 1971. Compared with past performances of the regular and irregular forces in MR IV, this had to be considered a major accomplishment. Credit also must go to the MR III GMs, particularly GMs 32 and 33 for their efforts in MR IV.

Increased air support from the USAF during December 1972 and into January and February 1973 also played a major role in the defense of MR IV. Without this air support, the defense of such a wide area in MR IV, with the limited forces available, would not have been possible. Employment of air power, and the training of small unit commanders in its use, were major accomplishments. Another aspect of the successful upgrading of air support in MR IV was the increased combat proficiency of the RLAF. The small RLAF unit at Pakse improved remarkably during the period of intensified war. By the war's end they were the most proficient in all of Laos and were readily responsive to the needs of the ground forces. A major factor in this improvement was the training and employment of the Lao FACs which improved communications with the supported ground unit considerably.

Finally, the streamlined command and control structure instituted at MR IV headquarters to the GM commanders and the subordinate battalion commanders was responsible in some measure for the tactical successes we enjoyed. A similar structure was also developed for managing the civilian duties of the military region commander. This structure eliminated much of the internal fighting between battalion commanders, although the patronage system for certain battalions still existed at the end of the war, particularly the battalions controlled by Phasouk and family. It is unfortunate but true that the MR IV staff and troop complement were just attaining a state of proficiency to fight the war when it ended. Unfortunately political considerations required that the major strike elements of the combat forces in MR IV were rendered practically combat ineffective by the end of the war, but this was due to prolonged commitment in the field which would not have been necessary had the future of a long war presented itself. The system for rotating units from front line operations to the rear for retraining and refitting was just beginning to pay dividends when the last major operation of the war was launched and the system was abandoned in favor of attempting

to retain territory for political reasons. It is reasonable to say that the continuing conflict in MR IV must have been a surprise to the North Vietnamese and this forced them to commit more forces than they had initially planned, just to hold what they had. This probably reduced the troops available for employment in South Vietnam.

Probably the most significant failure was the inability to end the continuing conflict with the Phasouk family which detracted from the war effort and caused some dissention in the officer ranks within MR IV. This problem continued from the time Phasouk was assigned as Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces in Vientiane to the end of the war. It is very difficult to fight a war while looking over your shoulder to make sure you are not being set up by the friendly forces.

Another problem never resolved was the lack of positive unified control of the military forces in MR IV. Each operation had to be separately negotiated with Phasouk's factions and then with GM commanders. Never was control firmly established. The very nature of irregular forces makes them extremely difficult to control but while the Lao irregulars were most responsive militarily to the MR commander, other factions remained beyond his control until the end of the war. The regular forces were little better initially. Although this problem was largely remedied by the end of the war, it proved a serious distraction at critical times, particularly during the fight for Khong Sedone when it was necessary to relieve the BV 44 commander (a Phasouk assignment) for serious breaches of military discipline. The repercussions of this relief dragged on for over six months and continued to be a distracting factor even later.

The failure of the support system to provide timely logistic and administrative support to committed troops was another serious shortcoming. Although significant improvements were made during the year just prior to the end of the war, this problem continuously haunted military commanders at all levels. Equipment vitally needed in MR IV remained in Vientiane or was only partially shipped to Pakse. As an example, bulldozers were vital to maintaining lines of communications in MR IV during the period of rapidly changing situations. These

bulldozers either remained in Vientiane or spare parts were not available. There was little that could be accomplished at the military region level to improve this intolerable situation.

Administrative problems remained to the end of the war. Medical facilities were totally inadequate for handling the increased casualties caused by the intensified fighting. The hospital in Pakse was constantly overcrowded and medicine was in short supply. This adversely affected morale at a time when the highest possible morale was needed. This fact also contributed to the continuing replacement/recruitment problems which plagued regular as well as irregular units to the end of the war. It was seldom possible to get more than 300 men in the field in the regular battalions although their assigned strength was, in some cases, over 800 men. Although some of the problem must be attributed to failure on the part of the commanders, much of it was due to the fact that a battalion commander had to carry his sick and wounded on the rolls until they could be either returned to duty or processed out of the army, an extremely difficult procedure. As a result, a battalion might have had up to 150 men who were physically unable to perform combat duty, but replacements could not be recruited due to a manpower ceiling.

Command problems have been previously discussed but one particular one deserves emphasis: this was the refusal to recognize that irregular units could not stay together beyond 90 to 120 days in the field. The optimum time to pull them out was when they were approaching 90 days in combat. At this time they still had unit integrity and desertion had not become a problem. Much beyond this time they began to fall apart. When the disintegration began, it culminated rapidly in total combat ineffectiveness. In many instances, this reality was recognized but could not be remedied due to the tactical situation. In these instances, the unit was just left in the field until it lost all combat effectiveness and then was completely rebuilt. After about a year's experience with these problems, a rotation system was instituted but soon abandoned when the push for territory began as talks on ending the war progressed. Had this system been maintained, it is quite likely that at least two irregular GMS would have been combat ready at war's end, although some territory may have been lost.

The continuing rumors of integrating the irregulars into the RLA, and the procedures which were implemented to fulfill this objective toward the end of the war, had serious adverse effects on irregular morale, particularly on the officers, because these men faced a loss of pay as well as prestige on integration; they could not be integrated at the grades they held in the irregulars and, in some cases, could not be integrated at all. Following the cease-fire, this became a major problem which continued up through the time when the Communists assumed control of Laos.

Observations

Militarily and politically also, Laos was considered the "well moderated people" of the Indochinese Union. From 1893 until 1945, only three uprisings took place, all of them staged not by plains-dwelling Lao, but by the mountaineers, particularly the warlike tribes living near the Chinese border. In 1934 in southern Laos, a very serious rebellion took place among the Alcak and Lavea tribes of the Bolovens Plateau which, initially caused by intertribal warfare involving kidnapping and human sacrifices, developed into a bloody, no-quarters-given jungle war. The French succeeded in restoring order in the Bolovens after almost two years of fighting but the primitive tribes of the area never really reconciled themselves to outside control. This accounted for the difficulty the RLG encountered in trying to counter the invasion of this part of Laos by NVA. The tribes displayed little loyalty to the government and, although they did not willingly support the NVA either, their independence and indifference to the struggle made it relatively easy for the North Vietnamese to impose enough control over the corridor they required in southern Laos to secure the flow of men and materiel into South Vietnam and Cambodia. Of course, although it is unlikely that the Communist government of Laos will be able to secure the active loyalty or support of the panhandle mountaineers, or even be able to control local banditry or incidents of insurrection in southern Laos, such lack of control will not be a serious threat to the security

of the government in Vientiane and after all, security in this wild, primitive region on the frontier of South Vietnam is no longer vital to North Vietnam's conquest of South Vietnam.

Occupation of and passage through the panhandle of Laos was vital to the NVA in its prosecution of the war in South Vietnam and its support of the Communist rebels in Cambodia. The US Government was aware of this fact, but for reasons beyond the scope of my personal knowledge, chose to be bound, at least overtly, by the provisions of the 1962 Geneva Accords which prohibited the introduction of "foreign" forces into Laos. The DRV ignored this prohibition, and the RLA was too small and too lightly supported to seriously challenge the NVA in southern Laos. Recognizing the reality of this situation, the RLG official position was neutrality, preferring to look upon the contest for control along the Ho Chi Minh trail as a dispute between the opposing sides in the war in Vietnam. But this position could not survive the NVA expansion of its road, trail and river network westward to the Bolovens Plateau. Laos had to fight the NVA for possession of the narrow strip of rich, populated territory along the southern Mekong river.

Still, for reasons not clear to me, US policy persisted in keeping the RLA high command out of the circle of consultation, coordination and cooperation in the prosecution of the war against the common enemy. The most glaring example of this was the US-supported South Vietnamese invasion of Laos along Route 9 to Tchepone in early 1971. Had we been informed, the RLA could have contributed at the least a valuable diversion, at the most a supporting attack, either of which could have enhanced the possibility of success in this campaign.

In February 1971, reacting to South Vietnamese military operations in southern Laos, some 80 percent of the North Vietnamese forces in Laos were deployed in the Royal Government's Military Region III and IV. These forces included infantry battalions, transport, engineer, and communication units; anti-aircraft and artillery units; and advisers to the Pathet Lao.

The NVA was less worried about the RLA than it was about the possibility that American ground troops would move into southern Laos to cut off infiltration and supplies to South Vietnam. Reflections of this anxiety were Radio North Vietnam's frequent broadcasts denouncing alleged plans by the US to establish bases within southern Laos from which to attack North Vietnam. The heavy bombing of the Ho Chi Minh trail by the US Air Force was also bitterly denounced by the North Vietnamese as a violation of the Geneva Accords of 1962. Furthermore, they charged that the US was violating the agreements by introducing ground forces into Laos. Their pronouncements on these subjects fulfilled several functions. On the one hand, by focusing international attention on these issues, they hoped to pressure their enemies into suspending all hostile action in Laos and, perhaps more importantly, to discourage future ground attacks in the trail area. On the other hand, they were signaling that they would respond to such attacks in kind. Whether in response to DRV propaganda or not, the fact is that the US never put any sizeable formation into Laos, and the South Vietnamese Lam Son 719 experience was the only one of its kind.

American and South Vietnamese high ranking officials, even those stationed in Laos, thought that the North Vietnamese flow of troops and materiel moving down to South Vietnam could be effectively interdicted from the air and by small raiding parties. This idea was proven wrong. NVA security was too effective to permit significant interference by our irregulars, and aerial interdiction was hampered by poor visibility. Even though the US had air supremacy, the targets were highly elusive. An effective interdiction campaign requires not only attacks on the supply routes and associated stationary targets such as storage areas, roads and bridges but also the destruction of the vehicles themselves and their cargo.

With American guidance and assistance the RLG responded to the increased NVA threat to southern Laos after the 1970 Cambodian *coup* by reorganizing the irregular forces into larger formations. The concept was that the new battalions and GMs would be able to conduct large raids and spoiling attacks against regular NVA formations, cause

high casualties, and withdraw quickly to fight again. The idea was valid, and we constructed a number of highly mobile, aggressive, tough units. Tragically, these hard-hitting units, which lacked the staying power of conventional infantry, were badly misused, partly out of necessity perhaps, but mostly because Vientiane did not understand the concept. The Vientiane leadership was loath to give up any more terrain to the NVA, and our light, efficient, irregular battalions were too often required to try to hold ground against the superior firepower and numbers of regular NVA formations.

The RLG was traditionally deeply concerned almost exclusively with developments in Military Region II because of the threat to the survival of the capital region. The Vientiane people for too long ignored the fact that southern Laos was a strategic area in the Communist plan to gain control of Indochina. Maintaining the seat of government in Vientiane was considered essential, but the developments in south Laos were what really determined the outcome of the war for Cambodia and South Vietnam and, as events proved, for the future of Laos as well.

The central lesson of the entire Laos experience is that however well intentioned and sincere may be the proponents of neutrality for small states, if the geographical position of the state is such that its territory is of vital importance in the military strategy of another more powerful state, that neutrality cannot be maintained. The attempt to maintain neutrality under these conditions in Laos meant that the aggressor, North Vietnam, because of its proximity, its military power and its disregard for even the forms of responsible international behavior, enjoyed a decisive military advantage.

The US, in its attempt to preserve at least the overt appearance of respect for international agreements and for the neutrality of Laos, declined to apply the military force and presence that would have been required to *enforce* Laos neutrality, which in this case could have been done only by physically ejecting the NVA from the Laos panhandle. It is doubly ironic that such enforcement of Laos neutrality would also have secured US and South Vietnamese objectives in Vietnam and Cambodia.

Finally, in the event anyone ever doubted the inseparability of the three major battlefields in Indochina, Laos, South Vietnam and Cambodia, that doubt should by now have been erased. Following two years of relatively little overt activity after the signing of the cease-fire in Laos, the collapse of Cambodia and South Vietnam signaled the abrupt and overwhelming assertion of Pathet Lao power in Laos which completed the destruction of the Neutralist government and its armed forces. North Vietnam's victory was complete. What lies ahead for the remaining non-Communist, free nation of the peninsula is now the question. North Vietnam emerged from the war the most powerful military force in the region. How will it use this power? I believe that the people of mainland Southeast Asia and the world will be treated to their next North Vietnamese lesson in military strategy when the Communists are ready to turn their attention to Thailand.

APPENDIX A

The Agreement on the Restoration of Peace and Reconciliation in Laos¹

In response to the august desire of His Majesty the King and the earnest hope of the entire Lao people who wish to end the war soon, to restore and preserve a durable peace, and to achieve national reconciliation to unify the nation, and establish its independence, neutrality, democracy and prosperity so it may play a role in the development of peace in Indochina and Southeast Asia;

Based on the 1962 Geneva Agreement concerning Laos and the current situation in Laos, the Vientiane Government side and the Patriotic Forces side have agreed unanimously as follows:

Chapter I

General Principles

Article 1

(a) The desires of the Lao people to safeguard and exercise their cherished fundamental national rights — the independence, sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of Laos — are inviolable.

(b) The declaration on the neutrality of Laos of July 9, 1962, and the 1962 Geneva Agreement on Laos are the correct bases for the Kingdom of Laos' foreign policies of peace, independence and neutrality. The parties concerned in Laos, the United States, Thailand and other foreign countries must strictly respect and implement this agreement. The internal affairs of Laos must be conducted by the Lao people only, without external interference.

¹Keessing's Contemporary Archives, April 16-22, 1973, p. 25843.

(c) To achieve the supreme objective of restoring peace, consolidating independence, achieving national concord and restoring national unity, and taking into consideration the present reality in Laos, which has two zones separately controlled by the two sides, the internal problems of Laos must be solved in the spirit of national concord and on the basis of equality and mutual respect, free from pressure or annexation by either side.

(d) To safeguard national independence and sovereignty, achieve national concord and restore national unity, the people's democratic freedoms must be scrupulously observed, which comprise individual freedom, freedom of religion, speech, press, assembly, establishment or political organizations and associations, candidacy and elections, movement and residence, free enterprise, and the right to ownership of private property. All laws, regulations and institutions contrary to these freedoms must be abolished.

Chapter II

Military Provisions

Article 2

Beginning at 12:00 on February 22, 1973, a cease-fire in place will be observed simultaneously throughout the territory of Laos. This includes:

(a) Foreign countries must completely and permanently cease the bombing of the territory of Laos, all acts of intervention and aggression in Laos, and all military involvement in Laos.

(b) All armed forces of foreign countries must completely and permanently cease all military activities in Laos.

(c) The armed forces of the Lao parties must completely cease all military acts that constitute hostilities on the ground and in the air.

Article 3

As soon as the cease-fire goes into effect:

(a) All military acts of assault, annexation, threat or violation on the ground and in the air against the territory temporarily controlled by the other side are strictly prohibited.

(b) All hostile military acts including the activities of bandits and commandos and armed activities and espionage on the ground and in the air are strictly prohibited. In case one side wants to transport food supplies across the territory under the control of the other side, the Joint Commission for Implementation of the Agreement will discuss and lay down a clear-cut procedure for this.

(c) All raids and operations of intimidation, repression and infringement on the lives and property of the people, and all acts of reprisal and discrimination against those who collaborated with the opposite side during the war, shall be strictly prohibited. People who were forced to leave their native villages during the war must be assisted to return there freely to earn their living in accordance with their desires.

(d) The introduction into Laos of military personnel of any type, regular or irregular, and all kinds of weapons and war material of foreign countries, except as provided for the 1954 and 1962 Geneva Agreements, shall be prohibited. In case it is necessary to replace damaged or worn-out weapons and war material, the two sides will discuss this and will make decisions by common agreement.

Article 4

Within 60 days at the latest after the establishment of the Provisional National Union Government and the National Political Consultative Council, the withdrawal of all military personnel and regular and irregular forces from Laos and the dissolution of all military and paramilitary organizations of foreign countries shall be completed. The special forces organized, armed, trained and commanded by foreigners shall be disbanded, and their bases, military positions and strongholds completely dismantled.

Article 5

Each of the two Lao parties shall return to the other party all persons, regardless of nationality, who had been captured or detained because they collaborated with the other party in the war. Their return will be carried out in accordance with the principles agreed upon by the two sides and be completed within 60 days at the latest after the establishment of the Provisional National Union Government and the National Political Consultative Council. Following the completion of the return of captured personnel, each side will have the responsibility to provide the other side with information on those reported missing during the war.

Chapter III

Provisions on Political Affairs

Article 6

Genuinely free and democratic general elections shall be organized to establish the National Assembly and a permanent National Union Government genuinely representing the people of all nationalities in Laos. The procedures and date of the general elections will be discussed and agreed upon by the two sides. Pending the general elections, the two

sides shall set up a new Provisional National Union Government and a National Political Consultative Council within 30 days at the latest after the signing of this agreement, to implement the provisions of the agreement and handle State affairs.

Article 7

The new Provisional National Union Government will be composed of representatives of the Vientiane Government and of the Patriotic Forces (Pathet Lao), in equal numbers, and two intellectuals who stand for peace, independence, neutrality and democracy, who will be chosen by common agreement by the two sides. The future Prime Minister will not be included in the two equal numbers of representatives of the two parties.

The Provisional National Union Government will be set up in accordance with special procedures by royal decree of his Majesty the King. It will perform its duties in accordance with principles unanimously agreed upon by both sides. It will have the responsibility to implement the agreement and the political programme agreed upon by the two sides, and especially to implement and maintain the cease-fire, permanently safeguard peace, observe all popular rights and freedoms, practice a foreign policy of peace, independence and neutrality, co-ordinate plans for economic construction and cultural development, and receive and distribute the common aid given by various countries to Laos.

Article 8

The National Political Consultative Council will be an organization of national concord and will be composed of representatives of the Vientiane Government and of the Patriotic Forces in equal numbers, as well as a number of personalities who advocate peace, independence, neutrality and democracy, to be chosen by the two sides by common agreement. It will perform its duties in accordance with the principle of unanimity of the two parties. It has the responsibility to consult with and express views to the Provisional National Union Government on major problems relating to domestic and foreign policies; to support and assist the Provisional National Union Government and the two sides in implementing the agreement in order to achieve national concord; to examine and adopt together the laws and regulations for general election; and to collaborate with the Provisional National Union Government in holding general elections to establish the National Assembly and the permanent National Union Government. The procedures for the establishment of the National Political Consultative Council will be discussed and agreed upon by the two sides, and will be sent to the Provisional National Union Government to be forwarded to His Majesty the King for his decree of appointment. The same procedure will be applied to the dissolution of the National Political Consultative Council.

Article 9

The two sides agree to neutralize the royal capital of Luang Prabang and the city of Vientiane, and to take all measures to guarantee the security and the effective functioning of the Provisional National Union Government and the National Political Consultative Council, and to prevent all acts of sabotage or pressure by any force from within or without.

Article 10

(a) Pending the establishment of the National Assembly and the permanent National Union Government, in the spirit of Article 6 in Chapter II of the joint Zurich communique of June 22, 1961, the two sides will keep the territories under their temporary control, and will endeavor to implement the political programme of the Provisional National Union Government, as agreed upon by both sides.

(b) The two sides will promote the establishment of normal relations between the two zones, and create favorable conditions for the people to move about, make their living, and carry out economic and cultural exchanges with a view to consolidating national concord and bringing about national unification at an early date.

(c) The two parties take note of the declaration of the US Government that it will contribute to healing the wounds of the war and to post-war reconstruction in Indo-China. The Provisional National Union Government will hold discussions with the US Government in connection with such a contribution regarding Laos.

Chapter IV

The Joint Commission for Implementation of the Agreement and the International Commission for Supervision and Control

Article 11

The implementation of this agreement is the responsibility of the two sides concerned in Laos. The two sides will immediately establish a Joint Commission for Implementation of the Agreement, comprising representatives of both sides in equal proportions. This commission will begin functioning immediately after the cease-fire goes into effect. It will perform its tasks in accordance with the principle of discussion and unanimous decision.

Article 12

The International Commission for Control and Supervision established in accordance with the 1962 Geneva Agreement on Laos, composed of representatives of India, Poland and Canada, and with India as

chairman, will continue its activities in accordance with the tasks, powers and principles as provided for in the protocol of the said Geneva Agreements.

APPENDIX B

Protocols to the Agreement¹

Summary of Main Provisions

(1) A Provisional Government of National Union would be formed, headed by a neutral Prime Minister and two Deputy Premiers, one belonging to the Pathet Lao and the other to the Vientiane Government.

(2) Representatives of the Vientiane Government would hold the Defense, Interior, Finance and Education portfolios; Pathet Lao representatives those of Foreign Affairs, Public Works, the Economy and Information; and "persons working for peace, independence, neutrality and democracy" those of Justice and Posts. The Vientiane and Pathet Lao Ministers would each be assisted by a Secretary of State drawn from the other party. A Vientiane Secretary of State would be assigned to one of the neutralist Ministers, and a Pathet Lao Secretary of State to the other.

(3) The Provisional Government would establish a political programme based on the 1962 Geneva Agreements and the recommendations of the National Political Consultative Council, which would preserve the people's liberties, implement a neutral foreign policy, ensure national unity, and "establish a peaceful, independent, neutral, democratic, unified and prosperous Laos."

(4) The Provisional Government would follow the unanimous decisions of the two parties in all important matters.

(5) The National Political Consultative Council would consist of 42 persons, comprising representatives of the two parties and neutralist representatives chosen by the two parties. Between sessions routine business would be managed by a permanent office consisting of five members chosen by each side. The Council would have six committees: a secretariat and commissions for (a) politics, law and general elections, (b) security and defense, (c) foreign affairs and foreign aid, (d) economics and finance, and (e) education and culture.

¹Keesing's Contemporary Archives, November 12-18, 1973, p. 26191.

(6) The Council would permit equally balanced discussion until a consensus was reached. If no consensus was reached the unanimity of the Vientiane Government and the Pathet Lao would be decisive. The Council would meet every six months for a session not exceeding one month, and if necessary the permanent office might call a special session.

(7) The Council would revise the law of 1957 on democratic liberties to adapt it to "current political realities", and would organize democratic general elections.

(8) The officials in the cities of Vientiane and Luang Prabang, which would be neutralized, would be chosen by agreement between the two parties. A joint police force would be set up in the two cities, consisting of 1,000 men from each side in Vientiane and 500 in Luang Prabang, and a battalion of troops from each side would be stationed in each city. Other armed forces would be forbidden to enter them, and military aircraft would be forbidden to fly over these cities.

(9) Provisional cease-fire lines would be established where the two sides' forces were in contact, and troop movements over these lines by land or air were prohibited. The armed forces and police were forbidden to take reprisals against persons who had collaborated with the other side.

(10) Troops and military personnel of foreign countries must be withdrawn within 60 days from the formation of the Provisional Government and the National Political Consultative Council. This provision applied to "military personnel camouflaged in embassies and consulates", except those whose names appeared on the personnel list of diplomatic missions recognized by the Provisional Government.

(11) Troops of both parties were forbidden to accept military equipment from foreign countries. Where replacements were necessary a unanimous decision by both parties was required. Foreign countries were forbidden to use Laotian territory to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries.

(12) "Special forces" organized and armed by other countries must be removed and their bases dismantled.

(13) Each party must release all soldiers taken prisoner and civilian arrested during the hostilities within 60 days from the formation of the Provisional Government.

(14) Refugees had the right to return to their villages.

(15) The two parties would form a Mixed Central Commission consisting of seven representatives of each side to implement the agreement. The International Control Commission would continue its work in collaboration with the Mixed Commission.

Glossary

ADC	Auto Defense de Choc (Self Defense Force)
ADO	Auto Defense Ordinaire (Local Self Defense Force)
ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam (South)
BC	Bataillon Commando
BCL	Bataillon de Chasseurs Laotiens (Infantry Battalion)
BI	Bataillon d'Infanterie
BLL	Bataillon Leger Laos (Light Infantry)
BP	Bataillon Parachutiste
BV	Bataillon Volontaire
DRV	Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North)
FAC	Forward Air Controller
FAN	Forces Armees Neutralistes
FAR	Forces Armees Royales
GB	Guerrilla Battalion
GM	Groupement Mobile
ICC	International Control Commission
JOC	Joint Operations Center
LAW	Light Antitank Weapon
LPLA	Lao People's Liberation Army
MMF/GRL	Mission Militaire Francaise pres le Gouvernement Royal Lao
NLHS	Neo Lao Hak Sat (Lao Patriotic Front)
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
PEO	Program Evaluation Office
PL	Pathet Lao

PLP	People's Laotian Party
PL	People's Party of Laos (Phak Pasason Lao)
P.S.	Pakse site
RLAF	Royal Lao Air Force
RLA	Royal Lao Army
RLG	Royal Lao Government
RO	Requirements Office
SGU	Special Guerrilla Unit
SGU-BN	Special Guerrilla Unit-Battalion
SVN	South Vietnam
TOC	Tactical Operations Center
TOE	Table of Organization and Equipment