The Royal Laoion Air Force 1954-1970 (U)

HQ PACAF
Directorate, Tactical Evaluation
CHECO Division

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Project CHECO 7th AF, DOAC

ROYAHIE DU
LAOS
The Royal Laotian Air Force: 1954-1970

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PROJECT CHECO REPORTS

The counterinsurgency and unconventional warfare environment of Southeast Asia has resulted in the employment of USAF airpower to meet a multitude of requirements. The varied applications of airpower have involved the full spectrum of USAF aerospace vehicles, support equipment, and manpower. As a result, there has been an accumulation of operational data and experiences that, as a priority, must be collected, documented, and analyzed as to current and future impact upon USAF policies, concepts, and doctrine.

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

Project CHECO, an acronym for Contemporary Historical Examination of Current Operations, was established to meet this Air Staff requirement. Managed by Hq PACAF, with elements at Hq 7AF and 7AF/13AF, Project CHECO provides a scholarly, "on-going" historical examination, documentation, and reporting on USAF policies, concepts, and doctrine in PACOM. This CHECO report is part of the overall documentation and examination which is being accomplished. Along with the other CHECO publications, this is an authentic source for an assessment of the effectiveness of USAF airpower in PACOM.

RADM J. GABRIEL, Major General, USAF
Chief of Staff
It is with a sadness tinged with anger that I offer, nearly 24 years after the fact, this new introduction to the last CHECO report I wrote or co-authored during my tour in Southeast Asia. For reasons I will note later, it is also the only one of mine that is currently available to the public. I can remember proofreading the manuscript as I was packing to return home from that long, long year, and I will never forget the comment from a senior officer at Seventh Air Force: "Pratt, this report reads like a novel. I couldn't put it down. But I don't like to believe that this is really the way it is."

First—a short overview (each report had one) about Project CHECO, a little-known, unique product of the war in Southeast Asia. Formed in the mid-sixties in Saigon, CHECO was the brainchild of Mr. Joseph Angell, a literary scholar then working for the Department of Defense. The mission of CHECO was basically to document the ongoing conduct of the war from the Air Force's perspective by producing book-length manuscripts that would be immediately available to commanders and policy-makers from Saigon to Washington. Unlike retrospective histories, these highly classified CHECO reports were to be timely, accurate, and (some hoped) unbiased—and would serve to influence future military decisions as well as to record what happened.

The first and longest-lasting head of Project CHECO was Mr. Kenneth Sams, a civilian who had an information/public relations background. Under Mr. Angell's direction, Sams assembled some civilian writers, then began recruiting military officers as well. When I joined the project in 1969, most of the dozen or so writers were and continued to be faculty members of the United States Air Force Academy, most of whom, like myself, were rated officers (pilots or navigators) with PhD degrees—and all of us were committed to try, at least, to "tell it like it was." By then, too, the mission of CHECO had been expanded to include microfilming of all relevant documents about the war—to include operations reports, correspondence, and any official piece of paper we could get in front of a camera.

There were ongoing series of reports, such as "Reactions to North Vietnamese Air Defenses" or "Air Operations in Northern Laos," that a new project member would be assigned to update. There were reports on specific bombing campaigns or techniques that someone in Headquarters, USAF would request. Many reports, however, might be generated this way: an operation would be scheduled to start; CHECO would be notified; and a writer or writers would accompany the troops, observing, photographing, and interviewing as the operation commenced. Occasionally, as was the case of this
report on the Royal Lao Air Force, a CHECO writer would spot a "story," see the need for an expanded study, and generate his own subject. Even today, Project CHECO continues to produce documents about US Air Force operations, most recently concerning the war against Iraq.

The result of Project CHECO's existence during the war in Southeast Asia was more than 200 lengthy reports and millions of frames of microfilm, most of which still remain classified for reasons that are impossible for one to discuss and still keep calm and rational. Previous to this one, all CHECO reports on Laos had been classified Top Secret, usually AFEO (Air Force Eyes Only), thus preventing any automatic future declassification. When writing about the Lao Air Force, however, I intentionally used only Secret portions of Top Secret documents and classified all my interviews no higher than Secret. Then, when following the normal coordination procedure, I managed to insure a lower classification by first coordinating the manuscript with a high-ranking Army officer (thus precluding the AFEO status). After all, by this time in 1970, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee had made public a general overview of what the United States was doing in Laos--and most of the major events of the war there had appeared in the American press.

As a result, with only a few pages deleted for "security reasons," this report is now, after more than 20 years, declassified. The pages that are missing are basically inconsequential, because they mainly summarize material that exists later in the text.

Of all my subsequent writings about the Vietnam War, this book is still my favorite, not so much because of what it's about but for what it shows--and because of the way it came to be. In the fall of 1969, I was sent from Saigon to Udorn, Thailand as Commander, Project CHECO, Thailand, initially to supervise and write the report on Operation "About Face." Mentioned in chapter four, "About Face" was the code name given to Hmong (in this report "Meo") General Vang Pao's surprising major offensive against the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao troops in northern Laos. Although I was a pilot, my job did not include flying responsibilities, but when I arrived in Thailand, I realized that I could not write truly about what I could not see, so as "Commander" I cut orders for myself authorizing me to fly in any aircraft in the inventory, got a helmet made with audio fittings for jet and conventional cockpits, and joined the Air America club at Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base. Because there were so many men wandering around Udorn in civilian clothes and combat boots, the sometimes forced air of secrecy caused one to ask few questions, so I wandered into an operations room and started flying T-28s (I had been an instructor pilot in this aircraft) with Detachment 1, 56th Special Operations Wing--the "Waterpump" outfit referred to in this report--on combat and training missions into Laos. Until the Spring of 1970, when the new Waterpump commander asked to see my orders assigning me to his outfit and I did not have any to show him, I learned first-hand about our training of the "little guys" for the Royal Lao Air Force. I'm also honored to have been named an "Honorary Tiger" by this group.
I also managed, by showing my Air America bar-chit book, to hitchhike one day on a C-123 to Vientiane, where I met the Air Attache, the US Ambassador and most importantly, the Raven Forward Air Controllers, about whom I wrote the draft of a CHECO report and later, the novel The Laotian Fragments. At that time, once one got into Laos, people there assumed one should be in Laos—and from then on I had little difficulty flying with the Ravens or with other groups (including the Army) who were conducting the clandestine air war over Laos. My only real official access problems are summarized in the explanatory footnote to page 153 of this report. Unofficially, I was able to talk to everyone.

I was wrapping up one of the Air Operations reports when I happened to fly down to Savannakhet one day, and a gracious RLAF captain asked if I wanted to join him for a drink at his Officers' club. I could hear the rumblings to the East of a B-52 Arc-lite strike and the day was very hot. The Lao captain was chagrined when we found the one-room "club" empty. There were a small portable bar, a couple of chairs, and two deep, tub-like sinks in the corner of the room. Obviously, whoever was supposed to take care of the club had not come in that day. "Mai pen Rai," we both said. It doesn't matter.

I walked over to the tubs to wash my hands and noticed a stack of legal-sized ledgers in the corner under one of the sinks. There were water spots on the top book and the pile was otherwise dusty. I reached down, extracted the top volume and found it to have a heavy composite cover. When I opened it, I saw in flawless inked script the title written in French: "The Official History of The Royal Lao Air Force."

Day by day, mission by mission, someone had kept a detailed flight log dating from 1961 to about 1964, and it was with this discovery that the idea for a CHECO report came to me. After all, most of the world knew about the United States efforts to create a South Vietnamese Air Force, but no one (including many of our top military and civilian commanders) really knew much about our similar efforts in Laos. Even I, who had pored through most of the available classified data, had not realized that the United States had been so involved as far back as 1961. I carefully took the ledgers back to Vientiane, read them, then had them sent to Saigon for copying, leaving instructions that they were to be returned to the Headquarters of the Royal Lao Air Force. I do not know where they might be today.

After receiving approval for the report, I began researching and interviewing. I also photographed some RLAF installations, especially General Vang Pao's home base, Long Tieng, also called 20-A. (These photographs have not been reproduced for this edition.) When I started, I had a general idea of some of the existing problems, but as the project developed and I came to realize the immensity of the disaster that had been building for almost a decade, I found myself becoming really angry. How much money had been wasted, year after year! How many lives had been lost! How far we still were from any solutions to the same problems that had always been there but now seemed much more threatening!
The problems, as documented by the text, were multiple. Both the Americans and the Lao had extensive Command and Control disasters, with personality-ridden military and civilian agencies often operating at cross purposes or failing to communicate with one another. Accountability was often non-existent, and the one-year tour on the part of some Americans led to many wheels being refashioned. Over and over again, I tried to determine "who was running the show," only to read about and be told at least four different answers. Corruption and illegal activities were on the rise among the Lao officers and politicians. And if the Lao and the Americans agreed on any one thing, it was that American airpower could work miracles--and that the Americans could do anything. Yet the North Vietnamese were clearly tightening their grip on Laos--and all indications were that the ongoing situation could only get worse. And all the time, valiant Laotians, Hmong, and Americans were dying.

My problem was also real: how to write this story so that one or more of the supervising agencies (the CIA, the State Department, the US Air Force, or the US Army) would not block it from getting to the people who could make a difference for the future and might even read this report. The opinion of the Lao, of course, would not be a factor, because they were not part of the coordination process. What I ended up writing is a document that may confuse a modern reader--because it is so filled with facts and statistics and tables and acronyms—but I hope that all these numbers, which are there to provide absolute credibility, do not mask the real thesis of this book: that the United States' attempts to create a viable Air Force for the Lao was in 1970 a tragic failure at an immense cost in men, munitions, and money. As I discovered, year after year some responsible Americans had decried, through channels, our efforts in Laos—but nothing essentially had changed. And nothing changed after my report, either. As of 1994, I know at first hand only one person outside of Project CHECO who has read it. Five years later, however, when the communist Pathet Lao assumed power, the failure of the United States efforts in Laos was complete.

I had thought of titling this introduction "By Lao Standards," a phrase that a reader will see over and over again in this book. In between anger pangs, however, I decided not to do so, because in the long run, perhaps Lao standards aren't that bad after all. It was a Lao friend, for instance, who perhaps summarized it all best: "We had a nice little war going here," he told me in 1970, "until you Americans and the North Vietnamese came along and really showed us how to kill people."

Fort Collins, Colorado
April, 1994

Publisher's note: Three of John Clark Pratt's eight books are about the war in Southeast Asia. They are The Laohtian Fragments (a novel); Vietnam Voices (a collage); and Reading the Wind: The Literature of the Vietnam War (with Tim Lomperis). In addition, he has made many presentations and has written numerous essays, introductions, and poems about the war. He has also published two Vietnam War novels under his own imprint: No Passenger on the River, by Tran Van Dinh and As Far Away As China, by Jay Boyer. He is presently a member of the English faculty of Colorado State University.
This CHECO report documents a unique experience in the history of United States assistance to friendly nations -- the covert attempt to establish an effective air force for an underdeveloped country in danger of being taken over by the communists. In creating and supporting the Royal Lao Air Force, US advisors have faced a host of problems, not the least of which has been that of command and control, as separate US agencies, each reporting through different channels, have helped build during the past nine years an air arm which has increased from a handful of transport and liaison aircraft to a strike force which is now capable of flying nearly 3000 sorties a month. Detailed in this report are the methods which the American Embassy, the CIA, the Air Attache, the Thailand based T-28, C-47, and H-34 Instructor cadres, and the Deputy Chief, JUSMAGTHAI have used during this period.

This report is not meant to be a success story; neither is it designed as an indictment. It is presented with the hope that by preserving a record of problems as well as accomplishments, future planners and commanders will benefit if an analogous situation should ever again face the United States Government.

ROBERT L. F. TERRELL, Colonel, USAF
United States Air Attache, Vientiane, Laos
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PREFACE</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FOREWORD</td>
<td>xiii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION - UNITED STATES ASSISTANCE TO LAOS AND THE RLAF</td>
<td>xiv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US Objectives in Laos</td>
<td>xix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER I --- THE EARLY YEARS -- 1955-64</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phoumi and Major Ma</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Emergence of General Ma</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER II --- THE END OF THE MA DYNASTY -- 1964-66</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combat Operations</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operations from Savannakhet</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Staff Troubles</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Downfall of General Ma - 1966</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEPCHIEF Assessment - 1966</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exit General Ma</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER III -- IN SEARCH OF ORDER -- 1967 - 1968</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiatus - 1967</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Troubles within the RLAF</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Fall of Nam Bac</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retrenchment and Attempts at Reform - 1968</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entrance of the Meo</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More Internal Problems</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reorganization</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operations -- 1968</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houei Mune Offensive</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accomplishments and Requirements - 1968</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER IV --- OPERATIONAL NECESSITY AND THE SORTIE EXPLOSION - 1969.</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States Assistance</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The RLAF -- Coherence or Confusion</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RLAF Training</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RLAF Pay and Support Functions</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RLAF Gunships</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RLAF and RLG Operations - 1969</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# CHAPTER V --- 1970 AND BEYOND

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RLAF Operations - Jan - July 1970</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RLAF Trends -- January to July 1970</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manpower Survey Results</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USAF Training</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-country RLAF Advice and Training</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The RLAF in 1970 -- Problems and Prospects</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operations and Aircraft</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintenance</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supply and Support</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personnel and Training</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corruption in RLAF</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theft</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RLAF &quot;Supplemental&quot; Pay</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Command and Control -- USAF and RLAF</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

# EPILLOGUE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

# FOOTNOTES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter I</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter II</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter III</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter IV</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter V</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

# APPENDIX I

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

# GLOSSARY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIGURES</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. (S) U.S. Military Assistance Program Trends</td>
<td>xvi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. (S) Schematic Organization for Military Assistance</td>
<td>xx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. (S) Laos Air Facilities</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. (C) Final Approach at Pakse</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. (S) Total RLAF Personnel - 703</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. (C) Vientiane Air Operations Center</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. (C) RLAF T-28s at Vientiane Return From an Airstrike</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. (U) RLAF General Staff - 1964</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. (S) RLAF Functional Commands</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. (C) Four RLAF Liaison Aircraft with U-4</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. (C) Takeoff Preparation for T-28 from 20A</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. (S) T-28 Combat Sorties - Annual Totals</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. (S) RLAF Pilot Inventory</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. (S) Pakse T-28s in Foreground of AOC</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. (C) Refueling T-28s at 20A - March 1970; RLAF T-28 Takeoff</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. (S) Ordnance Brought in C-130 is Uploaded; C-123 Takeoff at 20A</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. (S) RLAF Headquarters</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. (C) Airstrip at Muong Khasi - April 1970</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. (C) Bomb Dump at Muong Khasi - April 1970</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. (S) Flying Hours All Aircraft 1968 - 1971</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. (S) Force Strengths - RLAF</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Note

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Note

For reasons of "National Security," this page remains classified.
Until the arrival of the first T-6s, air operations usually consisted mainly of troop and supply transport missions. In 1959, for instance, L-20s and C-47s were used to reinforce and resupply beleaguered RLG forces at Sam Neua, but it was not until January 1961 that the newly designated Royal Air Force possessed any real strike capability at all.

Phoumi and Major Ma

In August 1960, the Neutralist Capt. Kong Le staged his short-lived but significant coup against the right-wing faction, with the result that the powerful Gen. Phoumi Nosavan fled to Savannakhet after using one of the Aviation Branch C-47s to drop leaflets which denounced Kong Le and declared a new government was in being. Savannakhet, situated in an area which offered a political, as well as a geographical sanctuary, also possessed the second best runway in Laos. Flying with General Phoumi was the newly promoted Major Theo Ma, an ex-paratrooper who had fought at Dien Bien Phu, had been trained in T-6s by the French, and who would rise to Brigadier General, command the RLAF, lead an air attack on his own capital, and flee the country—all within the next six years. From 1960 to late 1966, the story of the RLAF is also the story of the rise and fall of General Ma.

During the few months that Kong Le and his paratroopers controlled Vientiane, U.S. support to Laos took diverse forms. At first, the U.S. Ambassador to Laos opted for support to Kong Le's Neutralist faction, but the increasing evidence that the captain might negotiate with the Communist Pathet Lao led to a decision by Washington to build up General
Phoumi. Accordingly, from September through December, increasing numbers of Air America (the CAS directed contract airline based at Udorn RTAFB)--C-46s and C-47s flew military supplies to Savannakhet. At the same time, the Russian IL-14s began airlifting artillery and North Vietnamese gun crews to bolster Kong Le's troops. From 13-16 December 1961, the most violent fighting Laos had yet seen erupted in Vientiane, the result of which was a Phoumi victory and Kong Le's withdrawal to the Pathet Lao-dominated Plaine des Jarres (PDJ). Officially, Laos now possessed a conservative, United States-oriented government.

There was evidence of sharply increased Soviet and North Vietnamese support to the newly formed Kong Le-Pathet Lao alliance which had turned the PDJ into an armed camp, complete with 37-mm antiaircraft artillery (AAA). As a result, the U.S. sent the first six T-6 converted trainers to the RLAF Phoumiist forces at Vientiane.

It was at this time, January 1961, that the Royal Lao Air Force, as such, came into being. The T-6s were equipped with 5-inch rocket launchers and .30 caliber machine guns. Shortly afterward, T-6 instruction for Lao pilots was initiated at Kokatiem, Thailand. One of the first Lao pilots described the training this way:

"I was a member of the second T-6 class in 1961-62. Thirteen entered my class, but only eight were graduated. The first class graduated 12 out of 13. I received 11 hours of L-19 time at Kokatiem. The instructors there were all Thai. Then I went to Korat for six months in the T-6, then back to Kokatiem for gunnery."
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"combat checkout and strafe missions." On 30 October, the first planned
strikes were flown, with the resulting entry made in the log that "the
enemy was destroyed." During November, sorties averaged one per day per
aircraft, but by the end of the operation, the T-6s were flying twice
daily.

By the end of 1961, the RLAF had 721 officers and airmen on its
rolls. Despite the somewhat relaxed aura which surrounded many of its
operations, the existence of air support to RLG ground forces marked a
definite turning point in what had been a continuous power struggle among
the various factions which made up the kingdom of Laos. At one time,
the Soviet Union protested to the United States when the T-6s strafed
Kong Le-Pathet Lao forces along Route 13, but no satisfactory docu-
mentation of the effectiveness of RLAF close air support was possible.
In early January 1962, for instance, repeated T-6 strikes were unable
to silence a Pathet Lao mortar which was firing on the besieged govern-
ment stronghold of Nam Tha. Shortly afterward, the town was overrun,
and another RLG position was lost.

With the ability of the T-6s to deploy with relative rapidity from
one military region to another, a pattern did emerge which would affect
RLAF operations well into the future. Once in place at Pakse or Luang
Prabang, for instance, the aircraft came under command of the local FAR
Military Region Commander, and as happened in the late 1961 missions from
Pakse, the effectiveness of targeting, command, and control depended upon
the ability and political orientation of this one man. In later years,
regional autonomy would greatly affect the performance and capability of the RLAF.

Operations in 1962 continued much as they had during the previous year, but the RLAF was steadily growing in size and experience. In 1962, the first 12 student pilots were graduated from the 0-1 training school at Savannakhet, and the first four RLAF officers were sent to the United States for T-28 Undergraduate Pilot Training. A total of 12 officers and 3 airmen were CONUS-trained that year.22/23/

No accurate aircraft attrition figures are available for losses, but as a T-6 was lost, it was replaced from Thai resources to maintain RLA F strength at six.24/

The minimal amount of airpower now possessed by the RLG did not stem the advance of the Pathet Lao troops, augmented by North Vietnamese cadres and artillery. Consequently, after the Geneva Accords of July 1962, the dozen or so combat pilots of the RLAF entered into their second phase, one which began slowly but ended with an abrupt leap into the modern age.

Emergence of General Ma

After the Geneva Agreements, the organization of the RLAF was established as outlined in Figure 5. Colonel Ma, a boyish-looking man of about 30, had established himself early as a pilot's pilot. Trained in France from 1957 to 1959, he nevertheless harbored little love for his previous superiors. According to one source, as a company commander in the French-Lao Union Army he had parachuted into Dien Bien Phu, and when
the cause was known to be lost, the French told Ma to take care of himself. Subsequently, he took his company and fought his way to Luang Prabang. Considered by most Americans who knew him as the most patriotic member of the Lao military, Ma believed in strict honesty at all levels of the RLAF and sincerely desired to build his air force into a truly effective arm of the military. Unfortunately, two factors were to create severe problems for General Ma and the RLAF. For a country such as Laos, which possessed a heritage of gold and opium smuggling, Ma was honest to a fault. Second, his training had been as a field leader and as a pilot; he knew little about command requirements and less about administration. Moody, intense, emotional, Ma had almost no use for anyone who was not a fighter pilot. A close friend later said:

"After 1960, General Ma tried to expand the Air Force to make it bigger, but he did not know how to manage his people and materiel. He began to talk, talk, talk, and became more like a strong man after the move to Savannakhet. Not at first, but later. He wanted to set himself up as a Number One of the Air Force. He knew about Ky [Nguyen Cao Ky, the first VNAF Commander], and I think he wanted to be like him. He talked about it and made comparisons."

Another officer, one of the first three RLAF H-34 pilots, agreed: "I went to the same schools in France with Ma...we used to sleep in the same room. But after he began to fly the T-28, it was as if he did not know anyone at all, if he did not fly the T-28."

While Colonel Ma commanded only his small fleet of six T-6s at Savannakhet, there were few problems. At the same time, however, he
failed to gain effective control of the remainder of his growing air force. Immediately after the Geneva Agreements, the Russians, who had been supplying the Pathet Lao - Kong Le forces, began to train Lao pilots, but at Vientiane. In December 1962, the first of nine programmed Soviet IL-2 twin engine transports were turned over to the Royal Lao Government, and according to one observer, three were to be used by the Phoumist, three by the Neutralist, and three by the Pathet Lao members of the coalition government. Russian instructors worked with Lao crews, with the aviation gas being furnished by U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). An RLAF officer stationed at Vientiane remembered the brief stay by the Soviet pilots:

"The Russians had no training program at all. All they did was fly with us. At that time, we also had three AN-2 Colts which I flew. The Russians and the Lao could not understand each other. They had only one interpreter. The Russians only stayed six months. Afterwards, one IL-2 crashed in the PDJ; the others stopped flying because of parts. They are still at Vientiane, junked."

At Savannakhet, Colonel Ma seemed impervious to the growing political schism which was developing between the left and right wing factions of the government as the Russian influence on the Pathet Lao gave way to that of the more militant North Vietnamese.

As the Pathet Lao began to show more and more dominance over the Neutralist third of the coalition, and the North Vietnamese began constructing airfields in Pathet Lao-controlled areas, the U.S. implemented its plan to replace the T-6s with T-28s. Given final checkouts by U.S. instructors at Kokatiem, the four CONUS trained T-28 pilots flew
Col Thao MA  
CDT - RLAF

Maj Kongeana  
Chief, Staff

CMSGT CHOUMSY  
SECRETARY

G-1  
1st/Lt Banthahat  
2

G-2  
2d/Lt Phouy  
2

G-3  
1st/Lt Houy  
4

G-4  
Maj Done  
12

AB Commander  
Maj Southone  
270

Air Operation  
Maj Bounsoth  
24

TAC  
Capt Thongdy  
32

Maintenance  
Capt Syka  
30

Tower Control  
Maj Phouy  
30

Communication  
Maj Bounphou  
36

Supply  
Maj Noukeo  
14

Pilot School  
Liaison  
20

VTN/AFB  
Lt Col Oudone  
99

LP/AFB  
MSgt Sangat  
23

Pakse/AFB  
Capt Bounlieng  
25

TOTAL RLAF PERSONNEL - 703

Source: ARMA, VN Records

Figure 5
the new aircraft back to Savannakhet. An RLAF officer said, "One of the main reasons for the change was the increasing AAA threat." He also added that the few remaining T-6s which were still flyable were returned to Kokatiem by American pilots. Immediately, a T-28 upgrading program was started at Savannakhet, with Colonel Ma, who had been checked out at Kokatiem, doing much of the flying.  

RLAF T-28 operations dated from August 1963, when the records showed 52 hours and 5 minutes logged. That month, RLAF C-47s flew 223:00 hours and the utility aircraft logged 71:50 hours.

The RLAF now possessed not only a faster strike aircraft, but also one which could carry up to six 500-pound bombs or a variety of other ordnance. The T-6s had not been originally configured to carry bombs. The Air Attache said that bombs were supplied to the RLAF for the T-28s, "but we kept the fuses at Udorn." As had happened with the T-6, the T-28s were restricted to using only their .50 caliber machine guns and rockets.

Later in the year, partly because the RLAF training school at Savannakhet had produced only five candidates for further upgrading, the first USAF Mobile Training Team (MTT) was established at Udorn to train Lao pilots in the U-17 prior to checking them out in the H-34. From a high of 21 helicopters authorized to support JUSMAG, Laos, the number had dropped to four in early 1963, but in September, coincident with the transfer of the T-28s, the program once again began to expand.
Unfortunately, as an RLAF officer said later, "Ma did not care about helicopters."

In the early months of 1964, as the Laotian political situation steadily worsened, at least 13 Lao pilots were receiving T-28 training at Kokatiem, including the future Chief of Staff of the RLAF, Lt. Colonel T. Xeuam. On orders dated 11 February 1964, the first three RLAF pilots to fly the H-34 began training in March, the month which also saw the arrival of the C-47 MTT and the USAF T-28 Detachment 6, 1st Air Combat Wing, known as Project WATERPUMP.

Project WATERPUMP consisted of four T-28s and their flyaway kits, and, according to the Air Attache at that time, was housed in the back of the Air America hangar at Udorn. The Air Attache remembered being greeted by the first WATERPUMP Commander: "He was waiting on the ramp when we landed our C-47 at Udorn. He came up to me and said, 'At your service, sir.'"

With the RLAF T-28 strength now increased to six aircraft, as enough pilots became qualified to fly them, operations consisted primarily of training and reconnaissance flights. Politically, not only were there signs of growing dissension in the field between the Neutralists and the Pathet Lao, as the North Vietnamese began to exert more and more control, but there were problems within the Vientiane government as well. On 19 April 1964, the Commander of Military Region V, General Kouprasith, attempted a coup against Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma. Holding Souvanna...
briefly under house arrest, the conservative generals charged that the International Control Commission was incapable of overseeing the cease-fire and that the coalition government was a sham. When U.S. pressure in support of Souvanna was exerted, the coup attempt failed, and General Kouprasith quickly reaffirmed his support of the Souvanna government. Not so General Phoumi, who had remained in Savannakhet and had not changed his mind about the inefficacy of the coalition. His breach with the government continued to widen until in February 1965, his final coup attempt would cause his exile to Thailand.

During this period of political maneuvering, General Ma (his promotion had become effective on 1 January 1964) remained aloof. According to the air attache, Ma was distressed to find that his name, along with that of Phoumi and Kouprasith, had been circulated as being on the Revolutionary Committee for the April coup.

General Ma stayed with his 12 pilots and six T-28s at Savannakhet, but he did not have much time to brood. Apparently, he alone, had properly gauged the intentions of the Pathet Lao. Ma had told the Air Attache there would be a push against the Neutralists, but when the attache passed the information on to the Embassy, the Ambassador to Laos stated there were no other indications of a pending offensive. On 16 May, Pathet Lao and "Dissident" Neutralists attacked positions occupied by Kong Le's troops. Under the guise of a mutiny within Kong Le's own forces, and taking advantage of the recent turmoil in Vientiane, Pathet
Lao soldiers quickly overran most of the points which had been held by Kong Le since the Geneva Accords.

The Attache added:

"General Ma said the Neuts wouldn't fight. Ma thought they would join the enemy. When the offensive came, the Neuts did not fight, but they didn't defect either. Even though they dropped all their weapons and ran, they eventually made it back to Site 15. At that time, there was the same large concern about the government collapsing as there would be in 1969 and 1970. No one knew how far the enemy was planning to go."

With dissension in Vientiane, bombs without fuses, and a commander who was already at odds with all factions of the government, the RLAF was about to come of age.
CHAPTER II
END OF THE MA DYNASTY - 1964-1966

With the enemy attacks of May 1964, the need for an expanded RLAF close air support capability was obvious. In the next two-and-one-half years, U.S. financial assistance was to increase threefold, USAF aircraft would begin bombing in Laos, more U.S. personnel would be introduced in-country, and the RLAF strike sortie rate would jump from 96 sorties in May 1964 to a high of 1,014 combat sorties (including those of the Thai pilots) in January 1966. Yet, at the end of this third phase of RLAF development, after the 21 October 1966 bombing of Vientiane and the exile of General Ma, the 33 T-28 aircraft available for training and combat would be identical to the number possessed in September 1964, and while the combat ready pilots' strength had more than doubled from 13 to 33, the end of 1966 would see the RLAF as a fragmented force which lacked direction, motivation, and above all, effective leadership at all levels.

The reasons for these problems are complex. First, the reintroduction of Thai pilots to support Laotian ground operations created another autonomous group within an already disparate military structure. Also aircraft losses were heavy, from combat as well as accidents. Third, the divided structure of the clandestine MAP did not permit dynamic planning, close supervision, or development of concerted training and upgrading techniques. Finally, exemplifying both a cause and an effect of the peculiar nature of Laotian politics, there was General Ma, who
controlled his air force like a team of palace guards. His particular brand of leadership, much of it a result of his deepening rift with the FAR commanders, produced a divided RLAF: there were some T-28 pilots who fanatically supported him, whereas disapproval of General Ma took diverse forms from others of the air force. From 1964 to 1966, many dedicated young Lao pilots flew and died in military operations conducted by their government, but even though progress had been made, the RLAF was a long way from self-sufficiency.

At first, the crash program to upgrade the RLAF produced amazing results. When Project WATERPUMP was established, the USAF pilots had two basic purposes: first, to train Lao crew-members, and second, to be used for "emergencies" at the Ambassador's discretion. In May 1964, a full-scale emergency existed. Accordingly, the first admitted USAF "reconnaissance flights" were authorized over Laos (actually, RT-33s had flown similar reconnaissance flights from Don Muang RTAFB from April to November 1961). The decision was also made at this time to augment the RLAF by reintroducing Thai strike pilots. On 17 May, the second day of the Pathet Lao offensive, the U.S. Ambassador to Laos authorized the T-28s to use 100- and 500-pound bombs. The following day, all four WATERPUMP T-28s were loaned to the RLAF, leaving the Udorn training detachment without aircraft. Replacement arrived on 22 May, six T-28s and four RT-28Ds from the Republic of Vietnam, the latter aircraft to be used for reconnaissance and training.

The Air Attache recalled the events of those frenzied days:
"When WATERPUMP was started, there was no real plan. There were many logistics problems—there were no vehicles, for instance, and everything was scrounged. Some people would come up for a week, three weeks, a month's TDY from MACV. If we got a man with a two-month TDY we knew we had some continuity. People were coming in from all over at all times. There was no real plan.

"You should have seen the way we trained them [the Lao pilots]. The WATERPUMP birds were a different model than the Lao had been flying, with a different cockpit configuration. We took four pilots and piled them into the airplane after giving them a basic ground briefing. Then we all flew to Vientiane, and that afternoon they dropped the first bombs on the PDJ."

When use of Thai T-28 pilots under the code word FIREFLY was authorized on 21 May, General Ma was not convinced that Lao and Thai pilots would work well together. As a result, the Thais were placed under operational control of the U.S. Air Attache in Vientiane, and an embryonic Air Operations Center (AOC) was established at Wattay Airport. One RLAf pilot said:

"I knew the AOC building at Vientiane existed, but no RLAf worked there. Only U.S. and Thai personnel. There was an RLAf Liaison/Observer only. I think that was what General Ma wanted."

In retrospect, it is probable that General Ma desired U.S. control for more reasons than just USAF operational expertise. Vientiane's Wattay Airport, from which the General's aircraft were to fly in defense of the PDJ, was within a FAR stronghold; and Ma preferred to have United States' personnel rather than the local generals in charge. Later, in the
presence of the Prime Minister, General Ma would be told that the RLAF was "not an independent service as USAF," but was an arm of the General Staff. He was, according to the generals, allowed to call his air force the RLAF only because "it suited U.S. MAP structure better."

**Combat Operations**

The first ten Thai pilots were given accelerated training at Udorn, but they were not released for combat until 8 June. Training was also stepped up for the ten Lao pilots, of whom five were to be combat ready by 1 August, the balance by 1 September. In the meantime, some Air America pilots were hurriedly pressed into service to fly Combat Air Patrol (CAP) for Search and Rescue (SAR) efforts. Authorized to expend ordnance, the Air America pilots flew strikes against AAA sites during rescue attempts. Neither the Lao nor Thai pilots were considered proficient enough for these operations. According to the Air Attache:

"Air America started flying the T-28s after the Navy pilot was shot down [Lt. Charles Klusman, captured and later escaped, flying an RF-8 6 June 64]. The Thais were flying CAP for the Air America choppers, but on one occasion they got lost because they didn't know the area, and even though the pilots were seen on the ground, the choppers couldn't get them out because of ground fire. After that, the Air America pilots flew SAR escort only in T-28s. There was a program worked up where Air America pilots would come down to Udorn once a week to fly and stay current--then, when they were needed, they'd launch. The Ambassador also authorized WATERPUMP IEs to fly these missions. The program, like the use of napalm, needed Department of State approval."

In mid-1964, air support for the Royal Lao Government consisted of the following: Thai pilots would take off from Udorn in the morning,
fly to Vientiane, refuel, arm, and fly strike missions, then return to Udorn in the evening. Air America pilots flew CAP missions for SAR efforts, as did some USAF IPs (the Air America pilots stopped flying T-28s in 1967). The Lao aircrews flew from Vientiane against targets in the PDJ. And on 9 June 1964, the first F-100 strikes were made against Xieng Kouangville AAA positions, initiating the use of USAF aircraft in support of the effort to contain the Pathet Lao. This truly international air force was under operational control of the U.S. Ambassador, through the Air Attache, in Vientiane.

The appearance of the T-28s was a great surprise to the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese forces. The first concerted ground and air offensive, Operation TRIANGLE, began on 4 June 1964, with the object of eliminating a potentially dangerous pocket of enemy from the area near Sala Phou Khoun at the junction of Routes 7 and 13.

The Air Attache commented on that operation:

"After Operation TRIANGLE, the ground commanders liked air support very much. So did Ambassador [Leonard] Unger and the others. When the first airstrikes were made, targets were not camouflaged and were easy to hit. TRIANGLE had a three column attack, each one led by a ground Forward Air Guide (FAG) from WATERPUMP....Operation TRIANGLE was the only one actually planned and conducted by the General Staff. The others were by the individual military region commanders....Unger agreed that it was the appearance of the T-28s that stopped the enemy advance and saved Muong Soui. The enemy did not expect air support."

The July 1964 sortie and ordnance figures showed the abrupt rise.
In April 1964, RLAf T-28s had flown 31 times; in July, 341 sorties were accomplished delivering the following ordnance:

Bomb-500 lbs..........323
Bomb-200 lbs..........327
Bomb-100 lbs..........109
Rocket, 2.75........737 rds.
.50 Cal. ammo........21,950 rds.

With variations in RLAf targets, on 11 June, an air attack on the town of Khang Khay damaged the Communist Chinese "Cultural Center," killing one Chinese and wounding five others. When a New York Times article identified some of the pilots as being Thai, the U.S. Government denied all allegations. Other targets included the Ban Ken Bridge on eastern Route 7, but the three missions flown against it in July were unsuccessful, and one T-28 was lost. Because of this and other examples of the inability of T-28s to effectively bomb heavily defended areas, USAF air would be called upon more and more frequently, and the T-28s would soon revert to the role of close air support.

At the beginning of September 1964, the state of the RLAf was this: there were 15 T-28 qualified Lao pilots, with four others scheduled to complete training on 15 September. Four more were in CONUS training, to become graduates in August 1965. Thai pilots numbered 16, with another 9 to be ready by mid-October. This pool of 20 combat-ready Thais would be maintained until mid-1970, when the program was phased out. By late December 1964, there were 40 T-28s and 19 Lao pilots available for training and combat.
In October 1964, with the annual wet season eroding the Pathet Lao supply routes, ground action was extremely light. In conjunction with the increasing USAF participation in the air war, plans were made for RLAF T-28 strikes on a variety of targets, in some cases jointly with USAF bombing, at other times using USAF air only for CAP.

Strikes were planned to start on 14 October for eight days, with RLAF T-28s flying two missions per day. There were 22 specific targets, mainly military barracks and installations, but including Mu Gia Pass as well. Many of the targets were in the Laotian panhandle along the North Vietnamese supply routes to South Vietnam. The first missions against these targets were flown on 15 October, and after delays because of holidays and divers, the program was completed by 27 October 1964. Although initial results were encouraging, final analysis showed overall results to be below expectations. Security, said the Air Attache, had apparently been compromised, and the enemy had even begun to dismantle some of the fortifications.

Operations from Savannakhet

In November 1964, when General Ma moved his aircraft back to Savannakhet from Vientiane, a pattern for RLAF operations began to emerge. The Thai pilots, staging first out of Vientiane, then later from Luang Prabang, began to operate almost exclusively in Military Regions I, II, and V, while the Lao, flying from Savannakhet, supported ground operations in the two southernmost Military Regions III and IV. As one RLAF pilot would say much later, “We always flew separately. No,
Ironically, General Ma's return to Savannakhet may have saved half the aircraft possessed by the RLAF, for on 24 January 1965, guns of a T-28 accidentally triggered at Vientiane caused the destruction of eight parked and fueled fighters.

With General Ma in Savannakhet, newly inspired FAR commanders were planning extensive ground operations for the coming dry season with their new weapon, close air support. It appeared that 1965 was going to be a good year for the RLG. As the Air Attache said, "Prior to May 1964, any government operations were a fiasco. The RLG troops were always afraid of the NVA. Phoumi knew this, and would say that they would always run away." After the T-28s arrived, the Attache continued, the MR III Commander "ginned up a plan to go all the way to Tchepone but we managed to hold him back."

Plans were being made for a further increase in RLAF capabilities to support a rate of 40 sorties per day. General Ma, asking for three more O-1s, intended to revitalize the Savannakhet training program in June, and the FY 65 total of 151 RLAF officers and enlisted men to enter third country training (including 14 officers and 24 airmen to CONUS) was the highest number yet. The runway at Savannakhet was being renovated, and already there were plans for more extended operations and construction at Luang Prabang and Pakse.

RLAF sortie rates for the first half of 1965 showed little increase
from those during the last half of 1964, and there were problems in getting replacement aircraft for the ones destroyed at Vientiane. Not until August did the inventory of T-28s exceed the December 1964 number of 40, and attrition had further reduced the number by the end of the year to 35.

Along with plans for expansion came the first indication of what would become serious problems in the area of supply and support. A Requirements Office memo records proceedings at a Deputy Chief meeting of 28 December 1964 as follows:

"...Much elaboration on sorties. What it amounts to is that with 40 assigned aircraft, a maximum of 40 sorties per day is the target. But no one was optimistic that this would be achieved, considering all factors."

One of the factors was maintenance. WATERPUMP was "concerned about the fact that the burden of maintenance for Savannakhet could be a problem if RLAF relied too heavily on Det 6 [WATERPUMP]. But all were of the opinion that RLAF would continue to do maintenance except for the problem jobs." RLAF C-47 maintenance at Savannakhet and Vientiane

* RLAF sortie figures before 1969 are contradictory. Some totals include Thai sorties; others do not, and one set of reports apparently does not distinguish between missions and sorties. For example, January 1965 RLAF sorties are cited as follows: 675 ("Effects of Air Operations, SEA," 2d Ed, 24 May 65); 337 (RO/USAID Records for Jan 65); 645 (DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI Hist, May 66). For February, the same three publications list 301, 229, and 413, respectively. Accordingly, extreme caution must be used when interpreting RLAF sortie trends.
was progressing satisfactorily, but maintaining the T-28s soon proved to be too large a problem for the inexperienced Lao mechanics to cope with. An AOC Commander later said:

"One of their big problems is a basic lack of mechanical aptitude. They don't understand primary flight or electrical problems. To them, it's Buddha, not an airfoil surface, that makes the airplane fly. We can convince them that it's the engine which makes the airplane fly and that when the engine stops, so does the airplane, but that's about all."

A former Deputy Chief further delineated the problem:

"Effective training is nonexistent in Laos. This comes about because of local lack of talent or desire to train; plus a knowledge that other arrangements will be made for training by in-country U.S. representatives, or by other governmental agencies or governments represented in Laos. In fact, Laotians do not really believe training is necessary to military success! Furthermore, illiteracy is high. A large percentage of soldiers who participate in third country [Army] training cannot read or write."

Faced with the need to maintain the newly augmented T-28 fleet to support the planned RLG operations, U.S. advisers, who were assigned to Savannakhet in early 1965, began to do most of the T-28 minor maintenance themselves, a habit which was to extend well into the future. All major maintenance continued to be done at Udorn either by WATERPUMP or Air America.

Supply became another problem. At Savannakhet, the personality of General Ma began to intrude in what had appeared to be a slowly improving program at the main RLAF supply depot:
"The Lao, in general, do not like written requests, nor do they understand or accept the necessary time delays between request and receipt. Controlled stockpiling is neither appreciated nor understood by the Lao personnel outside of supply. The prevalent situation is: an item is not considered until needed, if supply does not have it, then send a C-47 to Udorn. In fact, they sometimes send a plane to Udorn without checking supply. General Ma becomes very impatient with supply and is quick to criticize Americans when something is not immediately available because it was not programmed. He cannot seem to understand programming and allocation. He reacts like he feels no matter what he wants, the Americans can provide if they want. He considers failure to produce parts or supplies as a personal affront. Therefore, efforts to explain supply processes often meet with emotional outbursts. The end result is lack of good working relations between supply and General Ma's inner circles."

Noting this situation, the Air Attache commented: "Ma did understand the need for good supply availability. While he was in charge, they never stole even a damn spark plug."

Despite the growing problems with supply, maintenance, and the personality of General Ma, the RLAF did provide close air support to the three major RLG "limited" offensives (as they were called), in 1965. It is difficult, however, to differentiate between operations supported by Thai pilots and those of the RLAF. The three July offensives began near Sam Neua, around Attopeu, and north from Dong Hene. Each of these operations was individually planned by the Military Region Commanders: in MR II, the Meo General Vang Pao; in MR III, the FAR General La; and in MR IV, the FAR General Phasouk. Getting air support was "very inconvenient," said one RLAF officer. "The MR Commander had to call Ma directly for
aircraft, and if Ma didn't like him at the time, he wouldn't send air support. Either that, or it took three days through normal communications."

Use of the C-47 fleet was also affected by the personality of the fiery general:

"The C-47 program needs organization and guidance.... The Lao do not know how to develop schedules and use the C-47 force effectively. Most aircraft dispatched are at the personal direction of General Ma. I am not certain, but it appears he must approve each flight from Savannakhet. General Ma does not seem particularly interested in the C-47 fleet as an effective organization. His primary interest in the fleet seems to be to keep it out of the control of others. He often favors T-28 personnel at the expense of the C-47 group. This irritates and creates morale problems, and most seriously, it is creating a faction within the RLAF which appears to be gaining strength."

Despite the published elation by U.S. and RLG personnel at the effects of the T-28s, regular USAF close air support for RLG forces was called upon for the first time in July 1965. The F-105s from Korat and Takhli and F-4s from Ubon flew from a strip alert posture under the respective code words of WHIPLASH and BANGO. In August, for instance, they flew 120 sorties under the control of U.S. pilots who called themselves RLAF Forward Air Controllers. An AIRA augmentee described a typical mission:

"We would fly in a U-6. I was nonrated, and there was often a Meo who spoke Lao and a Thai who spoke both Lao and English in the back seat. On the ground
was a Meo and sometimes an American, who would point out the target to his Meo who then would radio the Meo in my back seat. He, in turn, would tell the Thai who would tell me. I'd call the fighters. Because we could not use marking rockets then, the first bombs were often the only method for marking the target. If the fighters hit the wrong valley, we had to start the whole process all over again.

As the USAF increased the number of airstrikes in Laos, both for interdiction and for close air support, observers credited airpower with preventing the expected enemy spring offensive from materializing. In the fall of 1964 and the spring of 1965, Communist truck traffic had been heavier than ever before, but by September there was still no evidence of a concerted drive by PL/NVN forces in any of the Military Regions. With RLG forces still pushing forward, optimism prevailed. Gen. Vang Pao, for instance, was "elated" with the T-28s. According to one report, "In his region, RLAF strikes killed Communist troops in trenches hidden by as much as three meters of earth." On 6 August, 24 RLAF sorties supporting Vang Pao's Sam Neua offensive were credited with 170-190 enemy killed by air. In the same area, enemy troops abandoned almost completely any attempts to move or resupply during the daytime, and for a while even resorted to airdrops in the Sam Neua area. By the beginning of the dry season in November 1965, RLG forces were in extremely favorable positions in all Military Regions.

General Staff Troubles

General Ma's own position, however, had noticeably worsened. In February 1965, General Phoumi's final unsuccessful coup attempt had caused
his exile to Bangkok. Once again, Ma did not join the uprising. Actually, according to the Air Attache, what Ma had wanted to do was to fly to Udorn until the whole matter settled down. When Phoumi told him about the coup, General Ma refused to go along, thus denying his close friend the air support he so definitely could have used. The Attache continued:

"Afterward, Ma was called to Vientiane, and Kouprasith gave him the word about who was running the show. He wanted Ma to have nothing to do with the transports, just to handle the T-28s. Ma said no, that he was the air force commander. That was the beginning of the end. From then on, Ma was afraid for his life."

In July, coincident with the national assembly elections, Ma charged that members of the General Staff were circulating rumors that he himself was planning a coup. He said that he had been meeting with his closest friends, General Vang Pao and General Phasouk, to plan stepped up drives against the Communists, and he told the Ambassador that he feared General Kouprasith would use the rumors as evidence to move against him. "I have no intention of starting a coup," General Ma told the Ambassador, "but if attacked I will defend myself." That someone definitely wanted him out of the way became apparent to all on 5 July when a bomb purportedly meant for him demolished the car immediately in front of him. The Air Attache remembered that night:

"At the last minute, Ma had decided to accept my invitation to a party. He had said that if he came to Vientiane that his life would be in danger. That night, Ma came up from Savannakhet. Two of his pilots and some nurses asked him to ride back to their house with them, and he said all right. He was planning to come back to my house. On his way back, they pulled up behind a jeep. There was an explosion as the jeep passed over a mine, or something, and it
was apparently detonated just a bit too early. Other people were hurt, but Ma was all right. He took a roundabout way back to my house, and said he wanted to go right back to Savannakhet. I told him he was safe here, and convinced him to spend the night. He left the next morning.

The problems between Ma and the General Staff seemed to have their roots in two areas: command and corruption (Chapter V). Operationally, Ma was a dynamic leader. Occasionally, he would personally direct ground troops from the air to move after he and his aircraft had made airstrikes in front of them, but his desire to model the RLAF after the independent USAF caused great concern in Vientiane. Secondly, his penchant for honesty was directly opposed to the beliefs of many high ranking officials who saw aircraft as expeditious means of transporting illicit but highly profitable opium and gold. "The big problem," said the Air Attache, "was that everyone wanted to make money and Ma wouldn't let them." He continued:

"He did not have much money himself and was known as the beggar general." Everything he had went for his troops. Even though he was a complete patriot and honest, he would not refuse to borrow from others who were not so honest. Once he flew up to Long Tieng to borrow $200.00 from Vang Pao, and when VP opened up his wallet to give it to him, Ma saw that VP had more. "I need that too," Ma said, reaching over and taking it all."

By mid-1965, as a result of his quarrels with the General Staff, Ma had been stripped of his authority to promote enlisted men, and there had been no promotions in the RLAF for over a year. The air attaches
and General Ma's USAF advisers attempted to mediate throughout the year, but each apparent soothing of the waters was followed by more troubles. By the end of 1965, Ma had not only canceled at the last minute his planned trip to the United States using the excuse that there was "activity in South Laos," but had virtually isolated himself in Savannakhet, ignoring all requests to come to Vientiane. The effect of these problems on his men, as an RLAF pilot testified, was significant:

"It is uncertain whether General Kouprasith really did not like General Ma, but Ma used to say he did not. Ma just would not do what the General Staff said. Once he even refused to come to a party for the King, and he would never come to Vientiane. As with the King's party, he told me to tell the others that he was flying. He did fly too much, and he never cared for paper work or managing. He would never let anyone else do anything— even at meetings. No one else could say a word. He began to get more and more unhappy, and the staff got more unhappy with him. He would make spot promotions if he liked you. Once he wanted to promote me, but I told him no, that I was too young. He sent me to France for fixed-wing IP school. All he cared about were his T-28s."

One of the U.S. attaches agreed:

"Since he is an insecure, moody person, he needs more than average assurances; thus, personal assurance from AIRA, visits by AIRA, etc., are very important... He also has no concept of organization because he distrusts so many people that he will not delegate authority or responsibility... He deals in personalities, not chains of command or problem areas."

Thus, throughout 1965, the RLAF was, as the Attache had phrased it, "a disgruntled, factioned force with little true organization."
The pilots, however, still flew their missions—approximately 5,000 sorties in all, of which more than 50 percent were accomplished by the Thais. Having lost between 20 and 25 aircraft to combat and accidents, the RLAF in December actually possessed five fewer T-28s than there had been a year before. Then, as 1965 closed, the NVN/PL launched the largest offensive they had yet attempted in Military Region II.

Downfall of General Ma - 1966

With all the pressures upon General Ma, it is remarkable that he managed to maintain his sanity. Indeed, there were to be serious questions raised during 1966 as to his mental state, and an attempt to get him to Clark AB, Philippines, for a complete physical examination was unsuccessful. Nevertheless, plans and suggestions were made for further expansion of RLAF capabilities. Although hopes to convert the RLAF to A-1Es were abandoned because of "financial considerations," according to the Air Attache, there was a concerted effort made to establish an RLAF FAC program at Savannakhet. In March 1966, AIRA wired CINCPAC that a FAC capability was "precisely what is needed in a war such as we have here. Once these pilots are trained, they should be of great value to the Lao interdiction program and close support with their ground units."

AIRA continued: "We are striving to develop, albeit the going is slow, as self-sufficient a little air force here as their capabilities will permit." Regular FAR officers had for two months been flying as back seat observers with USAF Cricket FACs from Nakhon Phanom, and of the 27 RLAF pilot training students then at Savannakhet, 17 could be made
available for 0-1 FAC training. During the next few months, training sites in Thailand were investigated, and the plan seemed well on its way to fruition, but politics and the immediate military situation intervened.

What had been a promising trend toward unity with the merger of the FAR and neutralist FAN troops under a unified command was disrupted by mutiny, when in late March a battalion of Neutralist soldiers deserted their posts near Muong Suoi and returned to Vang Vieng. Except for General Vang Pao's Meo guerrillas, the Neutralists were the only RLG troops in and around the Plaine des Jarres. FAN General Kong Le, who six years earlier had staged his brief coup, had lost control of his forces and would be ousted in October. At the same time, according to one report, NVN/PL ground forces had been making steady gains in MR II, and "it was obvious that the initiative had been taken completely away from Government forces." Despite evidence that the enemy had suffered heavy casualties from airstrikes, the infiltration and supply routes remained open, and reinforcements arrived without undue delay. From April to June, 1966, for example, the RLAF accomplished the following:

"...170 enemy troops killed and more than 10 wounded; four 37-mm anti-aircraft guns damaged or destroyed; one ammunition depot destroyed; one fuel area destroyed; one rice storage area destroyed; four 82-mm recoilless rifles and two 60-mm mortars damaged, and many buildings destroyed."

Nevertheless, enemy forces were making substantial gains in all areas. Even with the USAF BANGO/WHIPLASH close air support, RLG troops
could not hold against a determined and numerically superior enemy. As a result, on 18 April, what was called a "modest (32 sorties per day) air offensive" was launched by USAF aircraft in northern Laos, primarily by the 17 A-1Es recently transferred to Udorn from assets in Vietnam. RLAF sorties had taken quite a jump as well, averaging nearly 30 per day for the first three months of the year, and it was hoped that the increased air support would hold the enemy in check.

Three weeks later, however, General Ma's feud with Vientiane reached a turning point. That day, Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma informed the U.S. Ambassador that he had relieved Ma as Commander of the RLAF and had made him Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Intelligence. According to General Ma, no promotion was involved—he had been discharged.

Tense negotiations followed, with the Ambassador, the Air Attache, and the General Staff involved, exchanging arguments for and against retention of General Ma as Commander of the RLAF. There were reports of troops "maneuvering" around Savannakhet.

This resulted in the first of many subsequent attempts to reorganize the RLAF. Acceding to the U.S. Ambassador's request that the T-28s retain their "tactical flexibility," the General Staff nevertheless achieved the objective of consolidating transport and operational planning into a joint section of the FAR. In effect, the Generals had gotten their C-47s back. On the positive side, there was to be in principle, a joint or combined operations center concept established, with separate
T-28 squadrons assigned to four bases (as facilities became available): Vientiane, Savannakhet, Luang Prabang, and Pakse. General Ma was to remain as Commander of the Tactical Air Command, but his headquarters was to be moved to Vientiane. General Sourith, former Commander of the FAR Aviation Branch, was to head the new Military Airlift Command. "This reorganization was," said the Ambassador, "the best course of action under the existing circumstances."^57/

DEPCHIEF Assessment - 1966

As these events were taking place, DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI provided the first significant in-depth assessment of U.S. support and RLAF progress. The report was sharply critical. From March 1964 until April 1966, the following RLAF personnel had been trained:

1. **CONUS**
   - Officers - 63
   - Enlisted Men - 111

2. **Pilot, Mechanic, and Specialty Training by WATERPUMP**
   - **a. T-28**
     - Pilots
       - RLAF Graduated: 36
       - RLAF In Training: 10
       - Air America: 20
     - Mechanics
       - RLAF: 106
       - 20
b. C-47 Graduated In Training
   Pilots RLAF 19
   Mechanics RLAF 60

c. Specialty training
   Forward Air Guides 8
   RLAF Supply 11

3. H-34 MTT
   Pilots 6 2
   Mechanics 18 6

Expenditures for RLAF support, the DEPCHIEF stated, had increased from $4,218,148 in FY 63 to $21,776,000 in FY 65, not including USAID or CAS funding. The current (FY 66) program totaled $38,113,496, money which also provided for 67 additional aircraft to be used for attrition and force strength increase. Also included were funds to construct a new AOC at Savannakhet to augment the one already completed at Wattay Airport, Vientiane. Noting the proposed reorganization of the RLAF, the DEPCHIEF agreed that the objective of building an effective air force within Laos was "feasible and has in fact progressed notably since June 1964." His conclusions, however, were grim:

"The USA has provided over $107 million of Military Aid (FY 65-66) to support Laos during the period of this report. Additional and comparable sums have been expended by USAID and CAS. The net return for these amounts of money, and other support activities, has been small and intangible. The in-country program controlled, of course, by the Embassy, Vientiane, seems directed toward no firm objective; and its success is measurable only by maintaining a tenuous, shaky, political/military status in Laos. Few real political or
psychological gains can be found. The overall impression is of something just less than pouring money down a hole. Moreover, whatever terms of direction the USA policy objectives have employed are vague and ill-defined. Any directives guiding the application of tactical (or strategic) warfare in Laos today are virtually unrecognizable—and the period of our Laotian adventure will probably remain a thoroughly obfuscated affair; unprecedented and perhaps a buried classic of disorganized warfare. Unique in the annals of modern military history...Result: a costly war of attrition for the USA—one with no final objective defined....Friendly airpower has not been able to accomplish more than a partial hindrance to the Pathet Lao and Vietnamese in this remote and tangled area. I doubt it can ever do much more to increase its tactical influence in Laos under present rules of warfare."

Comparing the fluid military situation to the "Indian wars on our own Western frontier, circa 1830-1880," the DEPCHIEF noted unproductive training and problems with illiteracy, then commented more specifically on the state of the Lao military:

"Effective leadership is virtually unknown at all levels. It appears to be a word that was never translated into Laotian.

"Command and control of units or operations is usually based on a semi-committee system, rather than upon a single commander of authority (or responsibility). Regional, familial, and personal circumstances often induce weak and unsatisfactory command arrangements.

"Logistics planning for a given operation is for the most part left to an Assistant Attache (adviser) and/or one of the few RO/USAID field representatives; of which there are far too few of both available to meet the need. Demands from PAR commanders are always heavy, usually amounting to a request to outfit his entire unit."
"Supply training and discipline are missing factors.

"The introduction of extensive air support has fostered an attitude among Laos ground forces that firepower alone is sufficient to gain and control key terrain. A sad self-delusion which is not easily dispelled by the very few qualified U.S. advisers available.

"Coup, troop rebellions, and continuous general disagreement among many factors, including minor royalty, serve to weaken abilities and inhibit the formation of a strong central government or a sound political structure."

Admitting that his conclusions presented a "drear picture," the DEPCHIEF predicted that only direct U.S. intervention, the reestablishment of a uniformed MAAG group, or a sizable increase of U.S. military personnel among the Lao would alleviate what he saw to be a steadily deteriorating situation. He strongly advocated immediate implementation of his third alternative, the further augmentation of clandestine U.S. personnel. Shortly afterward, Project 404 came into being.

The DEPCHIEF's resume also indicated an area of friction between his office in Bangkok and the various agencies within Laos who were working for similar goals:

"The complexity of the operation has increased proportionally, however, and much closer coordination among USAID, American Embassy, and Deputy Chief is going to be required in the future. Under present in-country visit restrictions, this office has been unable to obtain accurate information from the American Embassy and USAID regarding such items as maintenance requirements, flying hours, and notification of advance expenditures and training requirements."