Exit General Ma

To the north, ironically, one of the few potentially effective commanders of "authority or responsibility," as the DEPCHEF had said, was on his way out. General Ma, although he had officially agreed to the reorganization plans, sat seething in Savannakhet, refusing to make the move to Vientiane. As increased USAF air support, coupled with RLAF strikes, once again blunted the enemy offensive, and as General Vang Pao began another wet season counteroffensive of his own, General Ma reached the breaking point. His health had been worsening, and even though the FAR General Staff constantly reassured AIRA that Ma was in no danger, the General expressed more and more concern over the safety of himself and his family. Finally, on 21 October 66, Ma rebelled. Sending his Savannakhet T-28s to bomb FAR General Headquarters, General Kouprasith's home and headquarters, and the Wattay artillery site, Ma sent the following impassioned message to the U.S. Ambassador:

"For the past several years, the Army has been driven to the edge of despair by the present armed forces high command. Those generals who sell everything from clothes to weapons have always managed to go on in their wrongdoing without being checked and punished. Those soldiers who desperately fight for the freedom of this country in which your government and the American people have pledged to support fail to get what you send physically. Corruption, indifference to the Army welfare, selfishness, oppressiveness, and cynicism have eaten away that wealth of pride in the soul of our officers and men. Unfortunately, the war won't end in a few years or months to come, as we all have hoped. The struggle will go on. Therefore, we still need to instill in the heart
of the Lao soldiers and people courage and unselfishness for their support of carrying on the fighting until the day our common cause will be achieved. If we chose to look on with appreciation, the awful act of moral killing performed every day by those so-called Grande Seigneurs of Vientiane, then we must admit that we chose to lose the battle against our enemy. We cannot tolerate and let those generals continue to betray the interests of the armed forces, thus the nation you pledge to help. We must stop them and we do it today. A change in the high command for the decency and truth will greatly improve the efficiency of the army, as it would be the first great thing to happen in the life of our soldiers. There was so much blood and sacrifice being lost in the battlefield to forget and forgive easily, for we want all to benefit if peace will come one day. We ask your help."

From Vientiane, the official U.S. position toward General Ma's attempt was "hands off". To demonstrate its noninvolvement, USAF canceled all strikes in Laos for that day. No U.S. personnel had advance knowledge of or participated in the affair.

When it was all over, 19 FAR soldiers had been killed, 50 wounded; but none of the General Staff were hurt. Civilian casualties numbered 4 killed and 15 wounded. Significant damage had been inflicted upon the intended targets. The U.S. AIRA, Vientiane said:

"Attack commenced from approximately 5000 feet, all high angle dives. Pilots displayed a high degree of professionalism. General Sourith, designated RLAF Commander, stated artillery compound totally destroyed, Kouprasith's home leveled, FAR Hq heavily damaged. General Sourith said, quote, Foolhardy event, but a good example of what the little planes can do, unquote."
When hoped-for support did not materialize and FAR troops began moving toward Savannakhet the next day, General Ma took 11 pilots and aircraft with him to Thailand where he sought, and after a lengthy session in court, achieved political asylum.

Although a former Air Attache (and a close personal friend of Ma) believed the General did not really want the bombing of Vientiane to happen and that he had tried to intercede with Colonel Bounlouth, his co-conspirator, at the last minute, the execution of the T-28 strikes and the subsequent defections were the most severe setbacks the RLAF had ever experienced. The U.S. Ambassador to Laos said:

"Our next immediate task here is to reconstitute the Air Force. Happily, our strategy succeeded in preserving all our T-28s from damage and safely in either U.S., Thai, or Lao hands. We will have no problem reassembling them into a strike force. We have at least 28 and perhaps more than 30 qualified T-28 pilots. The only thing we will lack will be the fighting spirit that Ma certainly had. Souvirth is no tiger and showed definite traces of a yellow streak in yesterday's events. But, since he's the best we have to work with, we'll start over again with him first thing Monday morning."
CHAPTER III
IN SEARCH OF ORDER--1967-1968

As the Royal Laotian Air Force entered its fourth phase, that of a slow progression toward organization and increased effectiveness, there were CAS reports that the enemy was continuing a buildup in the Sam Neua area and could soon make thrusts toward friendly positions. Despite the loss of its leader, the RLAF would now be needed more than ever. To some of the pilots who had remained at their duty stations, General Ma's departure left a "feeling of disorder". To an assistant air attache, it appeared that "the best pilots in the RLAF had left with him". Said an AOC Commander, "There was a complete breakdown". Nevertheless, on 10 November, combat flying was resumed, and during the remainder of the month, the T-28s flew 639 sorties.

Hiatus - 1967

For the next 13 months, the total RLAF sorties were to show a slight decline from those of the previous year, as aircraft losses hit a new high from both ground attacks and combat. During 1967, implementation of the promised military reorganization would run into delay after delay, creating severe morale problems within the RLAF and nearly causing a rebellion by some of the younger colonels. Even though more T-28s would be provided, new operational concepts would be used, and RLAF training by USAF instructors would be expanded, 1967 would be a static year for the RLAF. The young pilots continued to fly sorties as instructed.
while the politicians and General Staff quietly vied with each other for control of this most important military and political asset. Everyone agreed, however, that with the exile of General Ma, General Kouprasith's power was more secure than ever. According to his brother, Lt. Colonel Kouprasong, then Laotian Air Attache to Washington, General Sourith was a "weak officer who would fully support General Kouprasith." A few days later, Lt. Colonel Kouprasong assured USAF representatives of undivided FAR support for the RLAF, provided United States assistance and advice were maintained.

The new RLAF Commander began his tenure with an inspection trip. During the week of 6 November, General Sourith visited installations at Savannakhet, Pakse, and Seno. Meeting with local RLAF personnel, General Sourith stressed the point that he first intended to develop discipline, organization, and leadership. After three or four years, he stated, he would propose a separate air arm. Expressing concern over the haphazard methods of ordnance storage and handling, General Sourith said that he would also like to establish an Air Academy at Seno in the future. According to the Assistant Attache who accompanied him:

"All in all he displayed a sincere interest of the basic problems at hand, was well received, and bolstered a sagging morale. Needless to say, the RLAF did its best to 'put on a good show for the inspection'."

Although it would be a while before the Savannakhet squadron would again achieve full scale operations, the Thais and the RLAF pilots newly
assigned to Luang Prabang resumed their mission schedule in Northwest Laos as if nothing had happened. Strikes on 13 and 14 November killed at least 14 enemy soldiers and wounded five others, most of whom were identified as North Vietnamese. Additionally, plans were discussed for a Combat Operations Center in Vientiane, but a report in late November that "with representatives from the FAR... RO, USAID, AIRA, and ARMA, the COC has proved extremely valuable in coordinating military operations" was prematurely optimistic. This initial COC concerned itself only with some operations in northern Laos; it would be more than three years before a potentially useful country-wide COC would be in existence. Still, there was at least thought being given to a unified command structure.

With increased numbers of USAF airstrikes, especially against the supply routes along Route 7 and north to Sam Neua, a full scale dry season enemy offensive did not materialize. Instead, the NVN/PL began to resort to attacks against government outposts which were strategically vital not only to the RLG but also to the USAF. Supporting the bombing effort in North Vietnam, many of the forward Lima sites had weather reporting stations, navigational aids, and facilities for USAF rescue helicopters. On 6 January, a concerted attack in northeast Laos against Site 36 was beaten off by USAF jets and Thai-piloted T-28s, and the important site held. To the west, however, the new RLAF squadron at Luang Prabang was not as fortunate. On 2 February, what was called
a "disastrously successful" 15-minute rocket and small arms sneak attack caused the destruction of six parked T-28s and two H-34 helicopters. Three other T-28s and one H-34 were damaged. The new AOC was partially destroyed, and five friendly troops were killed. No enemy casualties were reported. A month later, on 4 April, Site 52 north of Sam Neua was overrun with relative ease. Apparently, the increased availability of airpower had caused the enemy to develop tactics of small-scale, nibbling operations which would, as the years progressed, slowly eliminate more and more RLG strongholds in remote areas.

The attack on the Luang Prabang airfield marked a sorrowful first for the RLAF and pointed out the necessity for increased base security, a task which was the responsibility of the regular FAR troops, not the RLAF. Luang Prabang was now the third base with a functioning AOC, and its strategic location permitted increased T-28 operations in all of northwestern Laos. "Our primary job," said a USAF AOC commander, "was the defense of Luang Prabang and Nam Bac," the latter being the last major RLG stronghold outside of the royal capital itself. By June, a total of six Americans were assigned at Luang Prabang.

From December 1966 to May 1967, T-28 sorties averaged 736 per month, with a low of 544 in April and a high of 842 in December and May. "This period," said the DEPCHIEF, "proceeded much more smoothly, politically speaking, than did the previous six months." By 17 July, the DEPCHIEF could report to CINCPAC as follows:
"The Royal Lao Air Force has remained relatively stable during this period. The T-28 sorties for this year have averaged slightly more than 400 per month for the RLAF and about 250 per month for the Thai pilots flying T-28 missions in Laos. The more favorable RLAF sortie rate is primarily attributable to an increase in pilots and available aircraft."

Unfortunately, the DEPCHIEF had not yet received word of the second and more destructive attack which had occurred the night before against the T-28s at Luang Prabang. On 16 July, a sapper team penetrated the perimeter defenses and successfully placed satchel charges on aircraft readied for the following day's mission. Nine more T-28s and one UH-34 were destroyed. The DEPCHIEF said later:

"The loss of such a large portion of the total T-28 resources seriously degraded the operational capability of the RLAF. Replacement aircraft for the Luang Prabang incident in February 1967 came primarily from the aircraft normally available for Thai (Firefly) sorties. The overall degradation was noted in the low sortie rate during February, March, and April 1967. By May 1967, replacement aircraft had been received to replace those destroyed, and the Luang Prabang sortie rates rose accordingly."

As if problems with the enemy were not enough at Luang Prabang, a unique situation developed shortly after the sapper attack. A T-28 was declared Not Operationally Ready - Supply (NORS) by the RLAF crews because it ostensibly was possessed by evil spirits. Although the Lao pilots refused to fly the aircraft, permission was secured for a one-time flight to Udorn where, under DEPCHIEF supervision, the aircraft was returned to a duty status.
Here, Buddhist monks were able to exorcise the bad spirits. The cost was $7.62 covering the cost of candles and herbs for the ceremony and Salem cigarettes, toothpaste, and soap for the monks. This was considered a small price to pay for the continued utilization of a $181,000 aircraft."

In mid-1967, the ground situation was relatively static, but once again there were ominous signs from the enemy. Reports circulated of an unprecedented buildup of NVN/PL forces in the Plaine des Jarres, and three new NVN battalions were said to be in the Nam Bac area. To the south, MR III and IV were unseasonably quiet as increased USAF airstrikes pounded the supply routes to South Vietnam. To counter expected enemy attacks, plans were formulated by the newly-created TAC North Command of the FAR for a joint air/ground operation against enemy reinforcements. From MR II, General Vang Pao began to move some troops toward Nam Bac to assist the FAR forces there.

Troubles Within The RLAF

The planned offensive never materialized, partly due to problems associated with the rainy season, but primarily because of growing disenchantment within the FAR and RLAF itself. The military reorganization, drafts, completed in January, were still being "considered" by the General Staff and the Prime Minister. Although the DEPCHIEF, from his position at Bangkok, Thailand, believed in August that the RLAF had "been reorganized into functional groupings that provide a better basis for management," his comment that "the greatest deficiency is leadership" indicated only the nature of the problem, not the extent. Actually, the RLAF as a whole was in very bad shape.
Morale throughout the RLAF was low, and there were reports that RLAF officers were often absent from duty for long periods of time. On 5 September, for instance, a combination of low pay and poor discipline triggered a refusal of some ground crews to load bombs. At Luang Prabang, short rounds from T-28s caused RLG forces to evacuate positions to the enemy. And because of what one RLAF pilot called the "unwieldy" apparatus of TAC North, there was a general lack of command and control in Northern Laos.

An outgrowth of the command problem was the "Opium War," an episode which involved all elements of the RLAF, including H-34s, C-47s, and T-28s. Jealous of their vested interests in the northwest Laos opium traffic, certain high-ranking members of the General Staff ordered the T-28s to bomb an unauthorized train of pack animals carrying opium across the Burmese Border. On 30 July, airstrikes were carried out, killing a sizable number of Hmaw tribesmen. Having been given instructions to watch the train closely, the T-28s executed airstrikes upon the order of an unidentified commander. Later, the Prime Minister would say publicly that he had authorized the attacks, but privately he admitted that he had not. Although the immediate U.S. reaction was to exert financial pressure to restrict and control RLAF operations, "with the menace to Nam Bac" becoming more apparent every day, the matter was dropped.

The overall RLAF situation in August was summed up by an attache:

"The troubles in the Air Force will not be eliminated by any simple formula; they are too basic."
The RLAF is divided into four basic groups which are mutually antagonistic: 1. The T-28 pilots who fight and die for their country; 2. the transport pilots who steal and traffic and make a great deal of money; 3. the base personnel which get next to nothing and resent it; 4. the General Staff...of the air force which merely jabbers and accomplishes nothing. Sourith has really not gotten hold of the problem and has not even begun to think of how to handle these four divergent forces and weld them into an organization which works. It will be a big step to get Oudone out to Savannakhet and to put Khongsana in as Chief of Staff, but Khongsana is really too mild to be able to control this beast. Sourith has certainly shown himself incapable of handling the RLAF."

On 27 September, the RLG Cabinet finally agreed on the planned reorganization of the FAR, as a part of which the RLAF would be constituted as shown on Figure 5. In addition to those shown on the chart, there were two additional commands: a School Command and an Air Base Command. Promotion procedures were established, and the head of the RLAF was to be "a general officer, who is a flier, or if none is available...an Army general." To implement the new reorganization, a committee of senior officers was selected. At that point, with 1,286 personnel assigned on the rolls, a disparity in the officer corps was apparent:

"The RLAF Commander has established a policy of filling his general staff positions with officers of field grade rank replacing many of the company grade officers previously in the positions. Country team members view this policy with apprehension. Junior officers are mostly CONUS-trained and familiar with MAP procedures. Senior officers are mostly French trained and not generally as knowledgeable....Generally, the outlook is for the RLAF to operate more autonomously than ever with practically no central control."
RLAF FUNCTIONAL COMMANDS

COMMANDER

DEPUTY

TACTICAL AIR COMMAND
MAJ THONGDY
Luangrath

1ST FIGHTER WING
2D FIGHTER WING*
3D FIGHTER WING
4TH FIGHTER WING

MILITARY AIRLIFT COMMAND
LTC BOUKED BOUNNAM

10TH AIRLIFT WING*
20TH AIRLIFT WING
30TH AIRLIFT WING
40TH AIRLIFT WING*

AIR TRAINING COMMAND
LTC BOUNSOTH
Phetramphanh

1111TH TRAINING WING

AIR MATERIEL COMMAND
MAJ SYKA
Vorakoumane

CONSOLIDATED MAINTENANCE GROUP

AIR COMMUNICATIONS COMMAND
CPT Thong SOUK

CONSOLIDATED SUPPLY GROUP

* Not Activated.

Source: DOD IR 2 856 034267, 21 Sep 67

Figure 9
Note

For reasons of "National Security," this page remains classified.
Toward the end of November, a group of 57 FAR colonels presented a petition to the RLG calling for a complete governmental reorganization, including a plan to bypass the present CINC and Deputy CINC of the FAR. When the petition was rejected, there were rumors about a possible coup attempt, but none materialized. The military situation around Nam Bac was becoming too critical.

**Fall of Nam Bac**

At Luang Prabang, the TAC North command was faltering. Having deployed 12 battalions to Nam Bac in August, a move which an attache called "reckless" and "very tempting to the VC," the command staff was also exploiting the local populace for personal gain: "The cost of living is very high—and the profit goes to Tactique North." By December, there was almost no organization at all. According to the AOC Commander, "The planned joint operation involving Col. Bounchanh's forces [Group Mobile 15] and Gen. Vang Pao's forces has slipped slightly behind schedule but preparations are continuing. GM 15 should start to move from Nam Bac to Gen. Vang Pao's area today. Col. Bounchanh still apparently has no concrete plans for his part in the operation. I have continued to try to obtain specific information on what their airpower needs are and continue to receive no specific targeting information. Col. Bounchanh will only say he wants air support, but he refuses to get specific on what targets he wants hit, when he wants them hit, and how he intended to coordinate his ground movements with air support. I asked specifically if he wanted fighter cover in the area for the GM 15 movement, and was told 'No'."

The next day, 880 troops were airlifted east to the Nam Ou River for their linkup with Vang Pao, but immediately afterward the enemy
increased pressure on Nam Bac and mortared the 2,600-foot airstrip and
the town's 3,800 FAR defenders.

During the attacks on Nam Bac, RLAF airstrikes from Luang Prabang
were not without their moments of singular success, but the lack of
coordination and control caused insurmountable problems. An RLAF staff
officer described the targeting procedure this way:

"A strike request would go from the battalion com-
mander to Group Mobile (GM) to TAC North to Vien-
tiane to RLAF Headquarters and then to the Luang
Prabang or Vientiane AOC. The answer would then
go back the other way."

It is no wonder that when the situation deteriorated rapidly a few
weeks later, AIRA wired the AOC Commander at Luang Prabang a desperate
message:

"General Sourith, General Oudone, and perhaps others
are at Luang Prabang. If you can get to Sourith and
Oudone, see if you can sell them on the following:

. Forget T-28 close support around Nam Bac
itself, except when specific targets iden-
tified from the ground.

. Use T-28s in maximum effort east of Nam
Bac, up Nam Ou, Route 19, on military
structures and other targets as you can
get them.

. You and your boys select the targets, not
TAC North. Use CAS maximum.

. See if general will let you more or less
take command, fly them when and as often
as you want."
The week before Nam Bac fell, RLAF T-28s from Luang Prabang had delivered 63.7 tons of ordnance and fired 26,885 rounds of .50 caliber ammunition, but without proper targeting, could not stop the enemy. 33/

According to the AOC commander,

"The feeling appears to be that airpower can work miracles in the battle of Nam Bac, and the T-28s are still not being properly targeted, due to lack of intelligence on part of FAR TAC North staff. The enemy is highly mobile and his movements are not known, but are estimated by TAC North. Targets being given are still area targets, and when pressed for definite targets, the coordinates given are usually based on outdated intelligence. The daily operations order from TAC North arrives at the AOC at approximately 1000 hours each day, and roughly translated from the French reads, 'All T-28 go Nam Bac, all day.' The T-28s report in to the Nam Bac CP and are given targets. Attempts to remedy the targeting problems have failed. The few times the O-1F has been utilised to check on suspected targets, the suspected targets proved valueless."

Five hours after this message was sent on 13 January, all contact was lost with the Nam Bac command, and an area search by three H-34s, one U-17, two C-47s, and the AOC U-10 had failed to turn up any trace of the friendly troops. 34/ A four-battalion NVA/PL attack had routed the defenders, and of the nearly 4,000 FAR troops, only some 1,400 were to be accounted for by the end of January. Stragglers continued to turn up as late as April. In manpower and materiel, the loss of Nam Bac had been the costliest RLG defeat of the war. 35/ During the first two weeks of January, Luang Prabang T-28s had flown 100 sorties in defense of Nam Bac, and the Thais from Vientiane had added 25 more, to little avail. That
same month saw six T-28s destroyed and seven damaged, including a flight of three which simply disappeared on a strike mission, besides six major noncombat accidents.

36/

During this first year without General Ma, the individual RLAF pilots, most of them warrant officers or lieutenants (by October, for instance, only one RLAF captain was flying T-28s in combat), had frequently demonstrated extreme gallantry. On one occasion, in an operation near Nam Bac, an enemy mortar and a heavy machine gun were pinning down government troops. Not yet able to drop napalm, the Luang Prabang flight leader loaded empty napalm canisters with aviation gas and, using all nine aircraft, soaked down the hill. They then set the fuel on fire with white phosphorous rockets and .50 caliber tracers. "We couldn't confirm whether or not they got the guns," the AOC Commander said, "but the enemy didn't shoot from there for a long time." 38/ Despite this and other acts of professionalism and ingenuity, the RLAF as an effectively-operating military organization had not progressed at all.

Retrenchment and Attempts At Reform - 1968

With the fall of Nam Bac, the year had hardly started auspiciously, and, in terms of the ground situation, 1968 would prove even more disappointing. Important major sites would be lost, and all but one RLG "limited offensive" would produce unsatisfactory results. For the RLAF, however, 1968 was a significant year. Not only did sortie rates finally begin to climb toward the desired levels, but, with almost agonizing slowness,
there were personnel shifts and command realignments which marked the first real movement yet toward a more efficiently functioning air force. With the completion of the new AOC at Pakse and activation of the first Lao T-28 squadron to be stationed permanently at Vientiane, the RLAF in 1968 once again began to expand its strength and capabilities.

Also during this year, the individual characteristics of the practically autonomous fighter squadrons (FS) began to emerge. At Luang Prabang, for instance, the role of the 1st FS was primarily defensive, assisting FAR troops in holding established positions. In MR II, T-28s from Vientiane, and later from Long Tieng, struck area targets and worked both on offense and defense with General Vang Pao's mobile guerrilla forces. Similarly in MR III, the 3d FS from Savannakhet worked with CAS-trained guerrilla battalions and FAR troops, but in MR IV the mode of operation was much like that of MR I--defensive support for relatively static RLG enclaves.

As the RLAF had increased in strength, so had the pressures for further reform and reorganization. In early January, a trend which had started with the departure of General Ma received more impetus:  

"The most significant trend within the RLAF is the one of decentralization of power and control brought about by the reorganization of 1 January 1968. The primary points of this reorganization are as follows: to abolish two major commands (Tactical Air Command and Air Transport Command), to give the Base Commanders more power (particularly in regard to flying operations), and in essence to establish composite squadrons at each of four operating bases. The reorganization..."
may be viewed in one of the two following manners:
(1) If an effective Commanding Officer is named Base Commander, better utilization of resources and a smoother operation may result; and (2) on the other hand, with no one officer in control of tactical or transport aircraft the RLAF may remain weak in the foreseeable future and still subordinate to FAR control."

The rationale behind decentralization was obvious to one RLAF officer: "After Ma left, we tried to divide the T-28s, so that there would not be one group. One group was too powerful." At Savannakhet in January, there were ten T-28s and 13 pilots who often staged out of Pakse until the AOC there was completed. At Luang Prabang, there was a squadron of equivalent size. The Thais continued to fly from Vientiane.

There were few problems with the attitude of the young T-28 pilots, but quite the opposite was the case with the older, higher ranking C-47 pilots and staff officers. Having had their families and their private interests established in one location since the beginnings of the RLAF, some of them were not going to move without a struggle. In addition, what AIRA had feared was about to happen at the two main bases, Vientiane and Savannakhet. As an attache noted, because "the FAR General Staff had a big hand" in directing the Base Commander assignments, two of the important selectees, as well as the RLAF Deputy Commander, were going to cause a great deal of trouble for General Sourith. By 22 January, only two of the reassigned officers had moved to their new positions, the Luang Prabang Base Commander (to be killed in action on 2 June) and the Chief of Intelligence. The Air Attache said:
"As far as the other newly assigned officers are concerned...Perhaps some of them just have not moved because General Sourith had not reemphasized the need for them to move, or perhaps because no one has physically moved them. However, in the case of some of the others, it appears to be a fact that they just will not move. There are some indications that General Sourith may lose face, and perhaps lose more control of the Air Force, by not being able to see the reassignment of these officers completed."

According to the RLAF Commander, the main reason why the officers refused to move was "that they were involved in corruption at their present locations." General Sourith further added that the newly appointed Savannakhet Base Commander, Lt. Colonel Outama, was also flying commercial aircraft out of Luang Prabang as a civilian. He had been authorized to do so, the General continued, by the Deputy Commander, Col. Oudone Manibod. Three men, he concluded: "Colonel Oudone, Lt. Colonel Outama, and Major Champeng must be kicked out of the Air Force." Even though he had gone to the CINC FAR with the statement that either these three or he himself had to go, nothing had happened. Commenting on this problem, an attache said:

"Some of the conversation with General Sourith is quoted directly, even though it appears rather elementary, to show how little authority, control, and power he really exerts over RLAF personnel. Note that he uses the term 'ask' instead of tell or order. During the selection of some of these officers, as well as previous reassignments, the General gathers all his staff plus many other officers and they choose an officer for an assignment instead of his making the selection and issuing orders."
Lack of command authority was not peculiar to General Sourith alone; however, it permeated the entire RLAF. An AOC Commander summed up the problem this way: "One thing the Lao won't do is...tell anyone to do something. They consider it bad manners." Eventually, the officers in question did assume their new positions, but in their roles as Base Commanders were to cause more problems, as General Sourith had indicated and as will be detailed later in this report.

Entrance of the Meo

At the same time that the staff officers were reluctantly changing jobs, a new and potentially disruptive element entered the RLAF. On 22 January, the first two Meo pilots were graduated from pilot training at Udorn. Looked down upon as savages by many lowland Lao, the Meo hill tribesmen of General Vang Pao had become a military necessity to the RLG. Previously, however, no Meo had been trained as pilots. The primary reason had been that the RLAF pilots were all officers and possessed, by law, at least a high school education. None of the Meos had received this education. But when General Vang Pao indicated more and more frequently to his CAS advisers that he would like his own Meos to fly for him, CAS quietly selected certain Meo officers and provided flight training for them in Bangkok. By the time the Meo student pilots were assigned to WATERPUMP for T-28 training, they already possessed at least 150 hours of light plane flying time. An assistant attache recounted the circumstances of the first Meo pilots:
"Yes, I remember the first training of the Meos. Oh, how I remember. The Lao didn't want them, said they couldn't be trained as pilots and that they didn't have the necessary education. Some of them had been flying with CAS; I don't know in what capacity, but a couple of them had a lot of time. CAS started with three. They spoke English very well. I was reluctant to have them trained, because I knew they wouldn't really be integrated into the FAR. They'd end up working for Vang Pao, who paid them. I was afraid that first, the FAR wouldn't be able to control them; and second, they'd end up flying out of 20A, which is a bad place to fly T-28s from. Look at the accidents they've had.

"Nevertheless, CAS got the three Meo in training, and when two were graduated, they supposedly became officers in the RLAF with full status to be given them after one year...The Meo were damn good pilots, and they were sent to Luang Prabang for their first assignment. Shortly afterward, they came back down to Vientiane and said they wouldn't stay at Luang Prabang any more, that they wanted to fly out of Vientiane. One even said he wanted to fly with the Thais. Sourith began raising hell about the lack of control he had over them, and CAS stepped in. The first thing we knew there was a Meo contingent at Vientiane. Then there was the mid-air collision, I think with the three T-28s. They've never been found. One of the pilots was a Meo, and in one of the airplanes was the Chief of Staff of MR V. There was a very big flap. With CAS backing, Lt. Lee Lua got his own squadron (there were about six pilots, I think), and the whole thing was a mess. Lee Lua had no interest in the RLAF, as he was being paid directly by Vang Pao, who gave him a house in Vientiane and a radio, so the two of them could talk directly. He was completely, as far as the RLAF was concerned, out of control. A new AOC Commander at Vientiane helped get some semblance of order, but then we heard there were six more Meo coming who were not English speakers. Some of us resisted, the RLAF resisted, because we saw a Long Tieng AOC in the wind, and as I said, it's just not a good place to operate from. Lee Lua was already landing at 20A regularly, and the whole thing was just bad -- news."
RLAF officers also had some reservations. A Squadron Commander said, "The Meo are paid more than we are, and they do not work for us. Personally, I like to fly with them—but you must understand that they are different from us." A staff officer agreed: "We hope the Meo can be taught the rules of safety and not [just] to fly, fly, fly, but it is General Vang Pao who controls them." In effect, what developed was that the charismatic MR II Commander soon possessed his own small air force within the RLAF, but by 1970 combat losses and aircraft accidents were to claim all but two of the eight Meos who had been trained.

With the Meo flying combat, a question of funding arose. "CAS runs Vang Pao," said the DEPCHIEF's Chief of Staff, "but these aircraft and the ordnance they deliver come from DOD assets. If they want their own air force, CAS should help pay for it." 

While working for Vang Pao, the Meo pilots as well as the Lao who flew with them enjoyed some special privileges. According to a Long Tieng USAF advisor:

"There was one Meo who is a captain when he's here with VP but is a sergeant in the regular Lao structure; Vang Pao promotes his own here, and he also gives the Lao pilots who fly something extra. I don't know about money, but he does give them presents, like motorcycles, etc... Perhaps the reason he let Lee Lua and the other pilot start at Luang Prabang and Vientiane is because B0 A is not the best place to start flying combat from."

Before long, even though it was not officially on record as such, there would actually be five squadrons in the RLAF when the Meo began keeping
their aircraft over night at Vang Pao's headquarters at Long Tieng. Eventually, out of necessity, an AOC was established there as well.

More Internal Problems

On 5 March, a joint ARMA-AIRA-CAS-RO meeting was held in Vientiane to discuss further reorganization of the FAR and RLAF. Such problems as the relationship of the Ministry of Defense to the FAR General Staff, the authority of the FAR General Staff to move troops, and the extent of illegal activity of the FAR were considered. Many suggestions for reform emerged, among them a realignment of the logistics and supply system, improved methods of selecting key personnel for positions of responsibility, and more careful scrutiny of trainees. Of greatest significance for the RLAF were the decisions to draw up a model incentive pay system for pilots and to take a very close look at the precise organization of the RLAF. On the latter subject, the conferees concluded:

"Among its many problems, the Royal Lao Air Force has no real understanding of its own organization, particularly the number of personnel in various categories of skills needed for its proper functioning. A study should be made based on manpower availability and functions to determine the best organization for the RLAF. Action: AIRA will investigate the possibility of a manpower study to be conducted with resources from within the United States Air Force."

When the study was completed, more than a year later, some alarming discrepancies would be noted.
Of greatest concern to all U.S. agencies, however, was the problem of the "top leadership of the FAR," which was affecting "efficiency, morale, and the public image of the army." Unfortunately, few, if any, high-ranking officers had ever been legally relieved of their positions in the Lao military except as a result of coups or banishment. The power of the traditional families was just too great.

Nevertheless, this first careful scrutiny of the overall command and control problem would be of great help to the RLAF, but not for some time. In the meantime, a series of events caused further problems. In late March, a mock trial was held in Vientiane. The accused were General Ma and his co-conspirators, still in Thailand under political asylum. Convicted of "willful homicide, attempted homicide, and being an accomplice to attempted homicide, theft, and being an accomplice to theft," and "causing unlawful explosions," Ma and his pilots were sentenced in absentia to terms ranging from two years' imprisonment to 20 years in jail, loss of civil rights and rank, and confiscation of property. The latter penalty was given to General Ma.

At the same time, coup rumors were once again circulating, and attaches reported that certain RLAF officers had been observed making unexplained flights. On 21 March, an RLAF C-47 left Savannakhet ostensibly for Vientiane. On the flight were Lt. Colonel Bounsoth, Vientiane Base Commander, and Lt. Colonel Kongsana, Deputy Base Commander (later Commander) of Savannakhet. With them was Captain Chantasone,
a U.S.-trained T-28 pilot who was among the most respected young officers in the RLAF. The flight terminated in Saigon, where the aircraft and crew were impounded by the South Vietnamese government. The cargo was a large amount of gold and opium.

Later, Captain Chantasone would tell an assistant air attaché that he had nothing to do with his selection as a crew-member on the trip, that his participation amounted to his carrying out a lawful order. He stated this operation "was his first big error and that he did not intend to repeat it." The attaché concluded, "When he stated this was his first big error, I am not certain what he really meant--getting involved or getting caught."

The effect on RLAF morale was significant. A FAR colonel told an Embassy Political Officer:

"The RLAF pilots were very unhappy about the government's decision not to request the release of the pilots and crew involved in the gold and opium smuggling in Saigon. The pilots believe that their colleagues are being made the 'fall guys' for 'haute personalities'. Unless the government changes its mind, the pilots are threatening to strike and also to present the RLG with a list implicating the various senior officials (presumably both military and civilian) who have ordered RLAF transport aircraft to be used for illicit activities."

There were indications, said an attaché, that "young RLAF officers were being 'set up' and that the senior officers of the FAR and RLAF were attempting to keep these young leaders from gaining power." Eventually,
after a great deal of adverse publicity, aircraft and crew were returned to Laos, but without their cargo. The two Lt. Colonels were reduced in grade to Major, and Captain Chantasone was temporarily grounded. Significantly, however, both senior officers retained their positions, as did the Luang Prabang Commander, Lt. Colonel Khammone, who General Sourith believed to have been directing opium traffic at Ban Houie Sai, using a United States-furnished single sideband radio.

Reorganization

At this point, observers believed the RLAF was "drifting aimlessly in its daily activities." Accordingly, a new organizational structure was being planned by May. This was to include "a general staff for the RLAF Commander and composite squadrons at each of the bases." One of the inequities had been that the base commander, usually a Lt. Colonel, far outranked the lieutenants and the occasional captain who commanded the fighter squadrons. Also being considered was a phaseout of the Thai Firefly team, even though they had been flying more than 50 percent of the T-28 sorties, at Udorn and Vientiane. The Thais would continue to fly, however, for the next two years, when RLAF force strength would be high enough to permit discontinuing this support.

Because of the functional problems within the RLAF and the belief by General Sourith that smuggling operations were definitely on the rise, on 25 July, AIRA proposed a realignment of USAF personnel at the RLAF bases to staff what would be a "modified Tactical Air Control System."
The Ambassador had told the FAR key personnel that "misuse of aircraft for personal gain... would no longer be tolerated and reforms must be initiated." AIRA also recommended that there be a reorganization of the USAF "advisory" effort at each AOC. The following were desired for each base:

1. Air Operations Specialist (T-28 IP qualified). Grade of Major; Fighter background; Experience in Counterinsurgency Operations desired.
5. Aircraft Radio Technician.
6. AGE Specialist.
7. Munitions Specialist (conventional).
8. Weapons Mechanic (conventional).
9-10. Engine Mechanics(2) (Reciprocating Engines)

During the following month, introduction of a C-47 MTT into Thailand was also requested from USAF SOF assets and the modification of four RLAF C-47s with a .50 caliber side firing and flare drop capability. On 26 August 1968, the DEPCHIEF initiated the official request action for the gunship modification.

As more USAF personnel became assigned to the sites and more RLAF pilots were graduated from Udorn, sortie rates took a sizable leap, from
a little more than 8,000 during FY 68 to more than 14,000 the following fiscal year (Fig. 12). New aircraft brought total available T-28 strength to 60 by December, and for the first time in two years, the graduation of 10 students on 26 September brought the number of combat ready T-28 pilots to more than there had been just before General Ma had left (Fig. 13).

At the command level as well, slight but potentially important personnel changes were occurring. By 18 September, a new post with the title, Deputy Commander #2, was established to be filled by the former Chief of Staff, Lt. Colonel Boukeo, who had been left without a job when General Kouprasith's brother, Lt. Colonel Kouprasong returned to the RLAF from his attache assignments. Kouprasong would not last long as Chief of Staff, however, for, family connections aside, he was basically a superficial and insincere officer." Even though General Sourith's injunction was to "never mind, politics are involved, you know," continued U.S. pressure and the growing realization that the RLAF needed more capable personnel at the staff level caused Lt. Colonel Kouprasong to be re-assigned. Colonel Oudone, too, after a detailed investigation of his illegal activities by General Sourith, was "moved over" from the RLAF to the General Staff of the FAR. General Sourith said, with a surprising display of determination, "I am kicking him out of the Air Force." By the end of the year, a few of the stumbling blocks on the way to reorganization had been removed.
1-20 COMBAT SURVIVORS
ANNUAL TOTALS

THOUSAND

FY 65  66  67  68  69  70  71

TOTAL
RLAF
FIREFLY

Source: DEPCHIEF

Figure 12
RLAF PILOT INVENTORY

T-28

C-47

H-34

T-28 AUGMENTED BY POOL OF 20 FIREFLY

Source: DEPCHIEF

Figure 13
Operations - 1968

Tactically, the year had not been a good one; but, despite the RLG loss of many strategic sites, for the first time since the RLAF inception, one large, combined air and ground operation demonstrated that the FAR and RLAF could work well together. On the negative side, the most significant loss after Nam Bac was that of Site 85, on Phou Pa Thai Mountain. Part of the 3,000 new NVA troops introduced into Laos, led by a crack sapper team, successfully captured this natural fortress and its tactical air navigation (TACAN) and MSQ equipment in March. Other smaller sites also fell, and large numbers of RLG troops and refugees had to be evacuated. In May, attacks on Site 36 were blunted only by the application of more than 60 USAF sorties per day; and in late 1968, an attempt by General Yang Pao to retake Site 85 failed, even though more than 1,000 USAF, Lao, and Thai sorties were flown against enemy defensive positions.

In Southern Laos, the NVA also reinforced their troops, and small, aggressive probes had succeeded by midyear in virtually isolating the small cities of Saravane, Attopeu, and Thakhek. In early August, the stronghold of Lao Ngam near the western foot of the Bolovens plateau was abandoned at the orders of the MR IV Commander, and by December, the enemy had taken the town of Tha Teng, just south of Saravane, and placed under siege the small garrison holed up in the fort.

Houei Mune Offensive

The one major bright spot during the year was the MR III Houei Mune
offensive from 19-28 May. As was true of so many of the Laotian ground operations, success or failure depended upon the commander, and in this case the choice of Colonel Thao Ly was a good one. An attache said, "Ly is one of the few young Lao colonels who possesses the ability and charisma to get the most out of his resources and men, including the T-28 pilots." On 18 May, Colonel Ly called a joint planning conference in Seno for AIRA, ARMA, USAID/RO, and RLAF representatives. It was, according to the assistant air attache, "the first time...that air elements were briefed in detail on a planned FAR offensive." During previous attempts to clear the Houei Mune area, no coordination had been attempted, and the result had been failure. For a change, air-to-ground communications were excellent, and Colonel Ly personally briefed each fighter or FAC mission. By establishing his command post in the Savannakhet AOC, Colonel Ly enjoyed excellent and instantaneous communication with all command and field elements.

The RLAF portion of the operation was termed "outstanding". Often flying missions longer than two hours each, T-28 pilots made their scheduled takeoff times, flew cover for friendly troops, then dropped ordnance in the path of the planned advance. There was almost no contact with the enemy, but there were indications of hasty withdrawals, and major credit was given the T-28s for their excellent coverage. When
The operation was over, RLAF T-28s had flown 83 sorties for 83 percent of the total (USAF fighters contributed 16). On 29 May, Colonel Ly and T-28 Commander Capt. Chantasone (recently restored to flying status) celebrated the success of the operation:

"During the victory celebration, they were waited on hand and foot by beautiful Lao maidens who even held their glasses to their lips while they drank. Colonel Ly stated that the enemy ran from air strikes and that the Pathet Lao had told local villagers that Americans were flying strike aircraft. Colonel Ly told villagers to look at Chantasone—a Lao T-28 pilot—it was Lao pilots that made the enemy run—not Americans."

The HOUEI MUNE operation was significant. It proved that an operation could succeed with proper planning, targeting, and coordination. This instance of RLAF/FAR cooperation in MR III would set an example, one which the other military regions, unfortunately, were altogether too slow to emulate.

Accomplishments and Requirements - 1968

At year's end, the RLAF was generally in much better shape, but only by Lao standards. One AOC Commander said, "The RLAF progress is steady but slow. So often the Americans make a big mistake—they try and grade the Lao by U.S. standards. It just won't work." Accomplishments, in addition to the HOUEI MUNE operation, included the first all-napalm day (13 September) for the T-28s from Savannakhet and the successful establishment of the AOC at Pakse in August. By 16 November,
the AOC Commander could report that the MR IV Joint Operations Center (JOC) was "in being and fully operational". Previously, the combat potential of the six T-28s had not been used or appreciated; in fact, at one time the MR IV Chief of Staff had not known how many T-28s were combat ready. Improved communications between ground and air elements had been achieved, and the potential now existed in MR IV for a functioning command and control structure which could exploit all available assets.

To the north, the Long Tieng AOC Commander was so elated with the T-28s that he made the following statement:

"The Thai, Lao and Meo pilots have improved to the point where they do a better job than American Air. After getting more pilots and airplanes, the locals should be able to take over a larger responsibility in BARREL ROLL, possibly discontinuing American Air except for interdiction, special target, and troops in contact."

As recognized by many officials, dedicated and eager young pilots alone do not make an air force function. There were the problems of supply and logistics, as well as the state of the RLAF training school at Savannakhet. Both of these operations were under scrutiny by the end of 1968, and each had a very long way to go. In May, for instance, the RO Aviation Branch Chief apprised General Sourith of the dismal state of affairs in one area of supply:

"As you know, control of personal and survival equipment has been a major problem within your supply system. Although adequate funds have been programmed to cover these items, a lack of control and advanced planning..."
has caused some of your crew members to fly with less than adequate equipment for their protection and survival in the event of an emergency."

No standard lists of required items, failure to use proper procurement methods, and a refusal to keep supply records were among the discrepancies noted, as was the now familiar habit of "expecting support from Udorn rather than taking requisitioning methods."

In fields other than personal equipment, too, the RLAF central supply depot at Savannakhet was in much less than satisfactory shape.

At Pakse there were U.S. supply problems as well:

"Munitions resupply, or at least the resupply system, is currently unsatisfactory at this station. The RO representative does not automatically initiate procurement action on ordnance, even though the daily expenditure sheets show the inventory headed toward zero. Moreover, he does not recognize the munitions inventory authorization published byOUSAIRA as formally binding since it does not bear the RO seal of approval."

All other sites reported similar supply discrepancies during 1968 as the RLAF increased in size and strength, and although the problems may have seemed minor at the time, from then on the small RO staff would be hard pressed to keep up with the demand.

As for maintenance, the Air America and WATERPUMP facilities at Udorn continued to do an excellent job, especially the former, in the area of aircraft rebuilding. In the field, however, the maintenance situation was still unsatisfactory:
"The RLAF is still far from self-sufficient in the aircraft maintenance areas although personnel are trained regularly and in sufficient numbers. RO/USAID and Air Attache personnel assisted in-country in every way possible; however, the leadership, supervisory ability, and dedication within the RLAF are not sufficient to insure a quality effort. Inspections are being performed more in theory than in fact."

An Air America mechanic had described a UH-34 brought in for unscheduled maintenance as a "flying accident going somewhere to happen," and the DEPCHIEF's conclusion in 1968 was that "the RLAF is probably doing more maintenance work itself than at any time in its history, but the quality is far too low to sustain operations." The quantity existed; by this time, more than 500 Lao mechanics had been trained by CONUS, MAP, and third country programs.

One of the reasons for the maintenance problems was U.S. inspired, the other, according to some Americans, was a characteristic of the Lao personality. Especially during a maximum effort, USAF maintenance advisers grew impatient with the minimally trained Lao and preferred often to do the work themselves to keep the aircraft flyable. An AOC Commander stated the problem succinctly:

"I have not been entirely pleased with the attitude of USAF engine maintenance and munitions specialists. A highly skilled and motivated individual assigned to each one of these areas is absolutely essential and his ability to work effectively with foreign nationals is deemed critical to the successful accomplishment of our mission...I strongly recommend that personnel..."
source agencies at Udorn be advised of the requirement for men who are not only expert technicians, but also instructors who have patience, tact, and a desire to guide the efforts of semiskilled, unstandardized ground support teams."

With increased manning requirements, however, USAF maintenance personnel were becoming more and more difficult to find. Even with the best of them, there was another problem, one which was perhaps even more difficult to solve. Another AOC Commander described it this way:

"Supervisory problems are large. There just aren't any Lao NCOs who want to make enemies. It's part of the Lao personality. When a man gets to be an NCO, he's done his bit out on the line getting greasy and standing in the hot sun. Now he wants to sit in the shade, and he does. We've got a lot of trained shady-tree mechanics. But this is a problem which they must solve for themselves. The SOF people assigned to an AOC just don't have enough time to instruct the Lao. We're too busy doing our job."

In addition to requirements for an improved supply and maintenance capability, the RLAF training capability was minimal at best. Because of the failure of the Savannakhet school to turn out enough C-47 pilots, the Ambassador had recommended that a USAF MTT be reestablished in Thailand. Equally necessary was an RLAF FAC capability. The five O-1 aircraft at Savannakhet were used strictly for training purposes, and no RLAF pilot had yet been qualified as a FAC. Early in the year, the need for an RLAF FAC program had been recognized by the DEPCHIEF, but his statement in April 1968 that "additional FACs are being trained and five
additional O-1A aircraft" would soon "perform FAC missions as part of
the tactical air units of the RLAF" proved sadly in error. During
1968, no RLAF FACs were trained, and the additional aircraft would be
used not by RLAF but by USAF Raven FACs, whose strength was increasing
rapidly as more and more USAF airstrikes were flown after the cessation
of missions over North Vietnam. Not until 1969 would an RLAF pilot be­
come FAC-qualified, and he was destined never to direct an airstrike by
himself.

As for training in general, the Savannakhet School was little more
than a token effort. Output of RLAF student pilots had dropped sharply
after a 1964 high of 26,* but had risen on paper to a total of 51 gradu­
ates by the end of 1968. The AOC Commander at that site described
the training situation:

"Aircraft utilization of the L-19 for training
purposes is extremely low. The Royal Laos Air
Force possesses five L-19s at this station of
which there were rarely two in commission. (A
safe estimate would be less than 20% utiliza­
tion.) Aircraft utilization is also affected
by the absence of any flying schedule and the
school being understaffed...Under present cir­
cumstances, instructor pilots fly when they want
to, as much as they please...At present there
are no guide lines established as to what an
instructor pilot's responsibilities and work
load are to consist of. The mismanagement and
lack of directives are more than evident in
the instructor's lackadaisical attitude."

*1965: 18; 1966: 0 (the Ma Coup); 1967: 26.
"Only the student participation and morale," said the AOC Commander, "were an asset to the program." The RLAF instructor pilots, some of them busy flying C-47s as well, did little more than introduce the fledgling pilots to the feel of flying.

In September, no doubt as a result of criticism, the Air Training School Commander published a syllabus of instruction. The stated objective was to "quickly train pilots who are capable of completing all the required missions in the Cessna 0-1A." By the end of the course, students were expected to be able to do the following:

- Land and take off on short terrain and from airfields at high elevation.
- Navigate by outside references.
- Accomplish, according to his ability, various types of activities, usually with standards listed here.

A total of 110 hours flying time was required, including navigation and dual formation, as well as introductory courses in meteorology, engineering, military training, and 180 hours of English language training. Based on a 20-point maximum, a grade of below 5 in one course or an overall average of less than 8 would be cause for elimination. Scoring standards were as follows:

- Perfect......................... 20/20
- Excellent........................ 18, 19/20
- Very Good...................... 16, 17/20
<table>
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<th>Score Range</th>
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<td>Good</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Passable</td>
<td>10, 11/20</td>
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<td>8, 9/20</td>
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<td>Nothing</td>
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At that time, there were only three instructor pilots, one of whom was an American who also taught navigation, aerodynamics, and basic instruments. Of the students in Class 68A (16) and 68B (35), six would become what the Commander called the "100 hour pilots" and complete the entire program. Nearly all the others, having received from 10-30 hours of O-1 time, would eventually go to T-28 or H-34 training at Udorn. In 1968, the only linguistic prerequisite for admission to T-28 training was to have completed on paper the required hours of English instruction, with a grade of bad or above. This minimum requirement was to change for the better in 1970.

In addition, the lone C-47 pilot assigned to the school trained a handful of 100-hour graduates as copilots in that aircraft, and also upgraded T-28 pilots into the C-47. This practice would receive strong criticism in the future.

Accordingly, the training program at Savannakhet was embryonic at best, but "by Lao standards," at least functioning. With the problems of supply and maintenance as well, the RLAF was evaluated by many as being little advanced or improved from previous years. An AOC Commander said:
"The command direction from upper echelons is almost entirely lacking. This is the major problem area, the effects of which are magnified in the lower echelon of the Royal Laos Air Force."

In perspective, however, the RLAF had come a long way. Not including the Thai piloted aircraft at Vientiane, there were now 32 combat ready T-28s and crews flying from four operational RLAF bases, each with a functioning AOC and all except Vientiane targeted much of the time by a varyingly effective JOC. Although targeting methods and accuracy had improved only slightly (a written fragmentation order, for example, was introduced in one JOC late in 1968), the greatest indication of future improvement by the end of 1968 was not only evidence of command and control evolution, but principally the increased efficiency of U.S.-maintained, repaired, and supplied RLAF T-28s. In December, total sorties flown amounted to 1,526, the highest in the history of the RLAF. The young Lao pilots had finally recovered from the loss of General Ma.
CHAPTER IV
OPERATIONAL NECESSITY AND THE SORTIE EXPLOSION: 1969

There were few signs of optimism as the new year began. Despite the record performance of the T-28s and the additional USAF air support, RLG forces were not only losing the initiative but there were indications by mid-1969 that Souvanna Phouma's government might even be about to lose the war. In many ways, it was to be a record year. Not even in 1964 or 1966 had the outlook for the RLG changed as drastically as it did in 1969, going from extremely poor in May and June to overwhelmingly favorable by December.

Many records were set: most RLAF T-28 sorties ever; most USAF sorties as well; most combat ready T-28s; and the first RLAF AC-47 operations. On the ground, the enemy would make the farthest encroachment yet into RLG territory, but in two military regions, the RLG forces would turn about and themselves move deeper into NVA/PL-dominated areas than they had done since the Geneva Accords.

There was a sizable increase in U.S. support as well, and a further personnel augmentation within and outside of Laos. Accordingly, as the war enlarged dramatically, attempts to resolve the recurring problems of RLAF manning, maintenance, supply, and command did produce some results, but not as many as had been hoped. Because of the stepped up pace of the war, United States personnel in 1969 assumed more and more
responsibilities as the logistics and materiel requirements of the RLAF hit new highs. And, added to the usual rumblings and disagreements within the RLAF itself, would be some problems of communication among the widely spread U.S. support agencies—DEPCHIEF, CAS, RO/USAID, and AIRA—as intelligence, targeting, training, and supply demands severely taxed the complex machinery which had been established for a war one-tenth its present size. There were many who might recall the U.S. intention, stated earlier in this report, "not to get involved in Laos." After seven years of clandestine assistance to the RLG and the RLAF, the United States was now very deeply involved.

United States Assistance

AIRA's request through the Ambassador to Laos on 9 November 1968 for a C-47 MTT was approved by Thai officials on 1 December 1968. Subsequent approval by USAF followed, and on 19 February 1969, the RTG granted permission for the C-47 MTT to be located at Udorn. By 28 February, all 24 USAF members of the MTT were in Thailand. On 10 March 1970, the first Lao class arrived—six pilots, six crew chiefs, and six mechanics. Two of the pilots were to be upgraded to instructor pilots; the others, who possessed various flying experience, were to be qualified as pilots. AC-47 operations were included as part of the curriculum. Later, eight gun mechanic/loaders were to be included in this first class. Shortly afterward, the U.S. Ambassador to Laos noted with alarm that there was a "movement afoot to propose that the team become a permanent fixture.
at Udorn." Citing what he called the "bitter price" which had been paid in Laos when TDY SOF personnel were replaced with one-year PCS advisers, the Ambassador requested that the MTT continue to be manned by TDY volunteers from SOF resources, not by "a group of middle-aged staff officers who maintain a modicum of straight and level C-47 proficiency by support flying." He predicted in closing that he foresaw no need for the C-47 MTT to exist for more than one year to eighteen months at the most.

The entire first class, plus the gun mechanics, were graduated on 1 August 1969. According to the instructors, the AC-47 crews were "the equals of their USAF counterparts at an equal level of training." The Lao pilots, the report said, "eagerly await the first RLAF AC-47 combat operation." In December, with a second and larger C-47 class underway, the DEPCHIEF noted that the Ambassador to Laos had estimated that the RLAF would be able to begin a self-sufficient training program by January 1972, and recommended that the C-47 MTT continue to be staffed by TDY personnel, at least through the fourth MTT.

A request for an in-country MTT, however, had been disapproved by the Embassy. On 1 May, the Udorn MIT Commander had proposed that Lao graduates of the USAF MTT be permitted to establish their own course at Savannakhet, instructing the same procedures and techniques that were being taught at Udorn, including gunship weapons maintenance. "In order
to accomplish this task and give the RLAF the capability of self-supporting operational training in-country," the Commander said, only three U.S. civilian technical advisers would be needed, to include a GS-15 Airborne Technical Training Adviser team chief. Total estimated cost for this proposal during a six-month TDY period would be $18,769.00. For the present 24-man USAF MTT, the six-month cost was $109,718.00. The Commander's final recommendations was that the "military MTT be continued through the second cycle, graduating more instructor-qualified personnel, after which the in-country program could then absorb the entire training program."  

On 11 June, the Air Attache (who had endorsed the suggestion) notified the MTT Commander the proposal had been rejected for three reasons: (1) to avoid additional U.S. personnel in Laos; (2) avoid accusations that we were violating the Geneva Accords by training in Laos; and (3) prevent Lao overdependence on the United States.  

Embassy guidance was to select a Lao officer in the next class who could direct such a school, offer him a "concentrated, in-depth exposure" to MTT organization and administration," and have the Lao start the school themselves. As had happened so often before, however, operational requirements in-country were to take precedence over training, and as the RLAF AC-47 assets began to arrive, more and more pilots would be needed to man them. As a result, during 1969 there was little emphasis placed upon training RLAF C-47 pilots to establish and run an MTT of their own.
The WATERPUMP T-28 program also experienced modifications, with incoming student classes increased from 12 to 18 per class after December 1968. Flying combat missions themselves on weekends, the WATERPUMP instructor pilots also managed to average at least two strike sorties for each of their students in the year's second class. An early WATERPUMP instructor, later an AOC Commander in Laos, lauded this procedure: "At first, there was no programmed USAF combat flying, but when it started, there was much more rapport between the Lao students and their instructors." In addition to expanded training, USAF/RLAF T-28 assets were also increased, but not without a series of problems which indicated more troubles to come. Stated simply, T-28s were becoming hard to obtain. The prescribed RLAF T-28 strength had been set at 53 (including Udorn training); by mid-1969 there were 60 aircraft actually possessed; and the U.S. Ambassador to Laos believed that a minimum of 77 was required. After a lengthy series of requests and turndowns because of "insufficient assets," the Ambassador wired the Secretary of State that according to his information there were a total of 896 T-28s possessed by the USAF, USN, foreign governments, and commercial concerns. "It would not seem unreasonable," he said, "to expect that with proper effort, imagination, and cooperation within the U.S. government, our modest request for an increase of 24 aircraft could be met." After all, he added, "in Laos we have the only active war in the world in which MASF T-28s form an integral part." Late in the year, after many more messages to USAF and governmental agencies,
the Ambassador was to get part of his request, and by 31 December, the first six of a promised 22 additional T-28s had arrived at Udorn, in crates.

Although the aircraft were there, the difficulties did not end. Severe management problems ensued. According to the DEPCHIEF's Chief of Staff, "the application of advance attrition aircraft" to bolster the fleet caused maintenance and ordnance support requirements which had not been programmed and which would require a further shortfall in planned expenditures. And because WATERPUMP was still manned for only 53 aircraft, there was insufficient manpower to handle them. Uncertain until the last minute when and how many aircraft would arrive, the WATERPUMP Commander remarked wryly, "I'm just going to leave the aircraft in the crates until someone straightens this mess out." Shortly afterward, TOY augmentees would arrive, and the new T-28s would be made combat ready.

Of all the means by which the U.S. increased its assistance to the RLAF in 1969, one stands out as possessing the greatest long-term significance. An outgrowth of the 5 March 1968 meeting in Vientiane, the proposed manpower survey of RLAF personnel was completed by 15 December 1968. What had seemed to be "a hopeless task" three months earlier, said the RO Aviation Branch Chief, had succeeded, as a result of a combination of dogged research, luck, and cooperation from the RLAF. Now in existence was the first accurate computer listing of RLAF personnel.