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THE AIR FORCE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

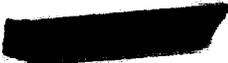
TACTICS AND TECHNIQUES OF NIGHT OPERATIONS

1961-1970

by

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OFFICE OF AIR FORCE HISTORY

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FOREWORD

This historical report is the fifteenth of a series of studies dealing with Air Force plans and operations in Southeast Asia prepared by the Office of Air Force History. The author, a Master Navigator, was formerly a member of the Air Force Academy history faculty. He also served a tour of duty in the Directorate of Operations, Headquarters, 7/13 Air Force, at Udorn, Thailand, and is well qualified to tell the story of nearly a decade of Air Force night operations in Southeast Asia. During the course of his research, he interviewed over a dozen pilots and crewmen who flew night missions along the Ho Chi Minh Trail and in North Vietnam. They provided him invaluable information on the problems of operating at night and the tactics they devised against an elusive enemy in a hostile, jungle environment.

In his history, the author recalls the pioneering efforts of the Farm Gate detachment and the start of night flare operations. He describes the equipment available at the time, modifications that were subsequently made to improve effectiveness, and the successes and failures that were experienced. He discusses the introduction of new aircraft and avionics, examines the role of the slow as well as the fast movers, and also reviews the operations of the invaluable gunships. His final chapter covers night reconnaissance and Rolling Thunder operations.

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PREFACE

At the height of the Korean War the Fifth Air Force commander Lt. Gen. Earle Partridge noted: "...the paramount deficiency of the USAF today--certainly as regards air-ground operations--is our inability to seek out and destroy the enemy at night."*

General Partridge's 1951 comments strikingly paralleled the situation confronting the United States Air Force a decade later in Southeast Asia. The Air Force possessed a strategic and tactical nuclear capability, sizable airlift forces, and an elaborate computer-oriented technology. Nonetheless, with but minor exceptions, it could neither detect nor nullify the nighttime operations of a supposedly backward enemy. There were several reasons for this. Night operations are always difficult, more dangerous than day operations, and require trained, experienced aircrews and specialized aircraft. Moreover, the Air Force usually placed night operations low on the list of its funding priorities.

National strategy also accounted for the lack of an effective night strike capability within the Air Force. The 1950's saw the United States committing its air power and nuclear deterrent capability to the defense of the Free World. This required a nuclear force so overwhelming that the Communists would not dare attack. The force must be so superior and well-defended that it could survive a sneak attack and still destroy the Soviet state. Furthermore, this massive-retaliation strategy would apply not only to a general war but limited wars as well. During the Eisenhower years nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them received the highest funding priority. The Strategic Air Command's bomber force was expanded and dispersed and a powerful intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) program inaugurated. Seemingly, the single question stirring discussion was how "massive" must massive retaliation be, or how much nuclear deterrence was enough. †

Gen. Otto P. Weyland, Commander, Tactical Air Command (TAC), did not agree that the forces which deterred general wars

*Robert F. Futrell, The United States Air Force in Korea, 1950-1953 (New York, 1961), p 297.

†George F. Lemmer, A Brief Survey of Comparative Military Strategy (S) (Ofc/AF Hist, 1966), p 27.

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could also deter limited wars. He frequently said the non-Communist nations faced a period of peripheral brush fire wars to be prevented or won only by superior tactical air forces. TAC would discourage limited wars as the Strategic Air Command (SAC) deterred general war. Towards this end General Weyland shaped TAC to resemble its big brother, SAC. Lower yield nuclear weapons became the mainstay of TAC strike units, a counterforce to Soviet (or Chinese Communist) manpower should deterrence fail. As a secondary mission, these weapons would roll back the enemy defenses prior to the penetration of SAC's heavy bombers. Conventional ordnance was considered "obsolete."*

Upon entering the Vietnam War in 1961, however, the United States saw that the use of tactical nuclear weapons was impractical. The low-key counterinsurgency conflict called for a fresh solution--one not found in general or limited war doctrine. In addition, the need to put available military funds into the nuclear deterrent during the 1950's left the Air Force ill-prepared for counterinsurgency warfare. Lacking an air power tactical doctrine for such warfare, the Air Force would now develop one from scratch using hard lessons learned in combat.

The Air Force discovered the "backward" enemy was rather ingenious and had learned his history well. Ten years before the North Korean and Chinese Communists had relied heavily on night operations to sustain the southward flow of men and materiel. Very early in the Vietnam War, the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong adopted similar tactics. The Air Force, therefore, faced an enemy who moved at night and hid by day. Lacking night-detection devices, the Air Force innovated and improvised until research and development could come up with the equipment to counter the enemy. How the men in the field did this is the core of this history.

Basically a hardware study, it goes far beyond how aircraft and equipment were used. Night air operations in Southeast Asia became a microcosm of the entire air war. Rules of engagement, weather, terrain, enemy capabilities and defenses--these reveal why the Air Force fought the way it did. Threaded through this

*Hist (C), Pacific Air Forces 1 Jan-30 Jun 58, I, Pt 2, p 68.

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tale of men and machines is the constant theme of military history--the offense-defense pendulum or constant action and counteraction between the Air Force and the enemy. How each side reacted to changes impacted enormously on the entire conduct of the war. Clearly then, these underlying factors furnish this study's sinew and strength and thereby its value.

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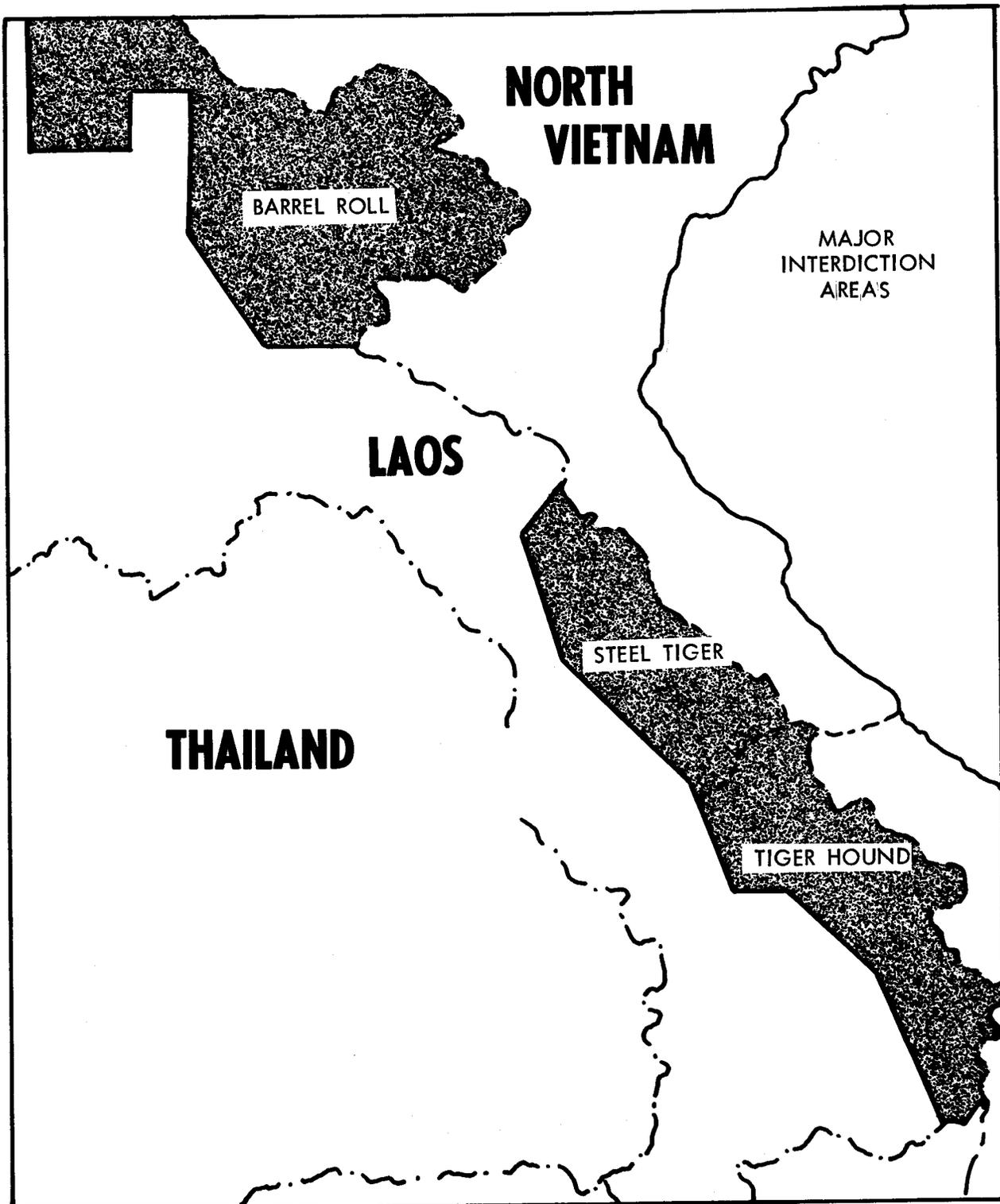
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SOUTHEAST ASIA



I. FARM GATE

On 11 October 1961, President John F. Kennedy decided to place an element of the 4400th Combat Crew Training Squadron on temporary duty with the Military Assistance Group-Vietnam (MAAG-V). The Tactical Air Command had activated this squadron in April 1961 under the code name, Jungle Jim, with the announced mission of training indigenous Air Force personnel to conduct counterinsurgency operations. In its development phase, the 4400th worked closely with the U.S. Army Special Warfare Center (the Green Berets) at Fort Bragg, N.C. On 14 November 1961, in line with the President's desires, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) ordered a detachment of the squadron to Bien Hoa AB, about 20 miles from Saigon. Later named Farm Gate, the relocated detachment included * four SC-47 cargo/flareships, eight T-28's, and four RB-26's. All these aircraft carried the orange and yellow star-and-bar insignia of the Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF). Moreover, since the Geneva accords prohibited the entry of tactical bombers in South Vietnam, the Air Force redesignated the B-26's as RB-26's to suggest reconnaissance aircraft rather than bombers.¹

(U) None of the aircraft initially dispatched had been originally designed as counterinsurgency weapons. They were either modifications of tried and proved aircraft or the only ones available. The C-47 flareships, for example, still retained World War II, cargo-hauling capabilities, had an additional fuel capacity, a loudspeaker system for psychological warfare, and were JATO-equipped.[†] The T-28 Trojan had been the Air Force's basic trainer in the 1950's. A new engine, a

*Further reference in this chapter to Farm Gate aircraft will be to the "T-28," "C-47" rather than "SC-47," and "B-26" instead of "RB-26."

In December 1961, to supply sufficient personnel for rotation to Southeast Asia, the Air Force augmented the 4400th Combat Crew Training Squadron with three similar squadrons. [See Counterinsurgency Ops Div, Dir/Ops, presentation to Lt Gen D. A. Burchinal, DCS/Plans and Prgms, subj: Air Force Role in Counterinsurgency, 1 Jun 62, pp 18-20.]

[†]JATO--jet-assisted takeoff.