Chapter V

Interdiction in the Laotian Panhandle

On 3 April 1965 an Air Force C-130—equipped with flares and accompanied by two B-57's—flew a night mission over routes 12, 23, and 121 in the southern panhandle of Laos. The crews of the three aircraft searched for Communist vehicles and other enemy targets moving down the Ho Chi Minh trail toward South Vietnam and Cambodia. The mission marked the beginning of Operation Steel Tiger, a limited U.S. air campaign against enemy troop and supply movements within the panhandle of southern Laos. It had been preceded by Operation Barrel Roll, another limited interdiction effort aimed principally against Communist Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese troops which began in December 1964 (see Chapter VI). Both were supported by U.S. reconnaissance missions inaugurated in May 1964 to obtain target information.

The Ho Chi Minh trail, consisting of numerous winding roads and pathways, had served for many years as an infiltration route between the northern and southern sectors of Vietnam. During World War II and after, Vietnamese insurgents used it to fight the Japanese and later the French. After Hanoi launched a guerrilla war against the Saigon government, the trail was used by South Vietnamese "returnees" and indigenous North Vietnamese personnel sent to South Vietnam to aid the Viet Cong effort at unseating President Diem and gaining control of the country. By 1964, the trail had developed into a system of many dry-season truck roads and smaller paths for bicycles and human portage. By early 1965 the trail had become the principal artery by which Communist personnel and supplies reached the northern sectors of South Vietnam.

The first Steel Tiger strikes—initiated a month after the start of Rolling Thunder attacks against North Vietnam—were directed against enemy personnel and supplies moving into South Vietnam through the DMZ or into the Laotian panhandle. Steel Tiger's mission was one of complementing Rolling Thunder. In both campaigns, political considerations were dominant and affected the tempo of the air strikes, which were generally limited in scope.

In undertaking these operations, Washington's primary concern was to avoid involving Communist China and the Soviet Union in the war, while maintaining the "neutral" status of Laotian Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma's government in Vientiane. This had been guaranteed in the 23 July 1962 Declaration on the Neutrality of Laos, signed by the Peoples Republic of China, the Soviet Union, the United States, France, Great Britain, and other nations. Thus, U.S. officials desired to avoid a large-scale air or ground campaign in Laos by any of the big powers which might undermine Souvanna Phouma's fragile regime. Another constraint on USAF operations in Laos was the Vientiane government's desire not to subject its people or troops to the hazards of unrestricted aerial warfare. Accordingly, the number of U.S. strike sorties, the areas where they could be flown, and the use of ordnance initially were severely restricted.

Because of this, command and control arrangements for Steel Tiger (and other air operations over Laos) were

A flare is readied for drop during a night mission

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(1) A gunship in action (2) Interior of an AC-119 gunship (3) Aerial mines are dropped to interdict an enemy ferry and ford near Tchepone, Laos, 1968 (4) AC-119 gunship over Tan Son Nhut, 1969

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FERRY AND FORD

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highly complex. The JCS relayed high-level Washington target authorizations to USAF and Navy commanders through CINCPAC in Honolulu and MACV in Saigon. Because USAF planes flying over Laos were based in South Vietnam and Thailand, the U.S. ambassadors in Saigon, Bangkok, and Vientiane also played important roles in controlling air operations. The position of the American ambassador in Vientiane was, however, unique. In the absence of a formal U.S. military command in Laos (such as MACV in South Vietnam), he became the principal American military as well as political authority there. On air operational matters, he normally exercised his authority through the office of the Air Force Attache.

In Saigon, General Moore's 2d Air Division, a MACV component, coordinated Air Force and other U.S. service air units employed in Steel Tiger. To meet political requirements arising from the use of Thai-based Air Force aircraft operating over Laos, General Moore had a Deputy Air Commander located at Udorn RTAFB. In April 1966, when the division was replaced by the Seventh Air Force, he became Deputy Commander, 7th AF/13th AF, reporting to the Seventh on operational matters and to the Thirteenth on administration and logistic matters.

At the start of Steel Tiger operations, the Air Force relied chiefly on the RF-101 and RB-57 for target detection and bomb damage assessment. For air strikes, it employed the F-100, the F-105, and the B-57 bomber—the last normally in conjunction with a C-130 Hercules flareship for night armed reconnaissance. As in the case of operations over northern Laos and North Vietnam, SAC KC-135 tankers were indispensable for refueling aircraft heading to or from targets or target areas. Air Force and Navy strikes initially concentrated on cutting roads and bombing traffic "choke points", particularly along routes leading from the Mu Gia and Nape passes, two principal entry points from North Vietnam into Laos. They also struck trucks, bridges, and troop and storage areas. The Air Force averaged 9 to 10 sorties per day, the Navy a slightly higher number.

Soon after Steel Tiger operations were launched in April 1965, the annual May to October southwest monsoon began sweeping over Laos, sharply curtailing Air Force and Navy operations. Enemy personnel, on the other hand, adept at using jungle growth to conceal their troop and supply movements southward, continued their logistic activities. If the monsoon rains washed out roads and trails, they used watercraft on swollen streams and rivers to transport their men and supplies.

Introduction of New Tactics

By mid-1965, despite the poor weather, Air Force and Navy pilots were flying more than 1,000 Steel Tiger sorties per month. To improve their operations against targets of opportunity, the Air Force placed several F-105's on "strip alert" at a Thai air base. The use of the Thunderchiefs on strip alert (nicknamed "Whiplash") became an enduring Steel Tiger tactic against fleeting targets. Another measure undertaken was to send South Vietnamese ground reconnaissance teams—trained and led by U.S. Army personnel — into the border areas of the Laotian panhandle to locate and determine the extent of enemy traffic along the trail. The first team was flown in and removed by helicopter in October 1965. Other ground reconnaissance teams followed and soon began contributing to Steel Tiger operations by directing strikes on enemy positions, truck parks, and POL, supply, and ammunition stores normally concealed by the jungle growth or bad weather.

As the southwest monsoon subsided in late 1965, the Communists stepped up their infiltration, exceeding earlier U.S. estimates that they would send 4,500 men and 300 tons of supplies monthly into Vietnam. As a result, American and Lao authorities agreed to concentrate more air power on a segment of the Ho Chi Minh trail most contiguous to South Vietnam and used extensively by the infiltrators. Air Force Col. John F. Groom drew up the operational, command, communications, and support requirements for the new air program. Nicknamed Tiger Hound, it began in December 1965. Tiger Hound required more resources than the Air Force had employed in Laos up to that time. An airborne battlefield command and control system was established, involving initially C-47's which were later replaced by C-130's, for overall control of air operations within the strike area. Air Force O-1's and A-1E's, along with Royal Laotian Air Force (RLAF) T-28's, served as FAC's. RF-101's and the newly-arrived RF-4C aircraft, which were equipped with the latest infrared and side-looking radars, also were employed for target detection. UC-123 spray aircraft defoliated jungle growth along roads and trails to improve visibility. The principal strike aircraft were B-57's, F-100's, F-105's, and AC-47 gunships. Substantial Marine, Navy, and Army air joined in the operation. The Army provided additional O-1's for FAC missions while its OV-1 Mohawks, which were equipped with infrared and side-looking radar, were used mostly at night and often flew with Air Force C-130 flareships.

To facilitate the search for and destruction of targets, Tiger Hound rules of engagement were somewhat less stringent than elsewhere in Laos. By the end of December, the Air Force had logged 384 strike sorties in Tiger Hound, 51 of them at night; the other services flew an additional 425 sorties. The chief targets were trucks, storage and bivouac areas, bridges, buildings, and enemy antiaircraft sites. A substantial number concentrated on cutting roads and creating traffic choke points. On 11 December, B-52's struck the Mu Gia pass area, marking their first use in Laos.

In January 1966, the Air Force launched another air program in Laos called Cricket. It involved the use of O-1 and A-1E aircraft, based at Nakhon Phanom RTAFB near the Laotian border, to fly visual reconnaissance or to serve as FAC's in the northern Steel Tiger and southern Barrel Roll sectors. In the Barrel Roll area, the mission was primarily to support friendly ground units; in Steel Tiger, it was armed reconnaissance. Air Force aircraft ranged outward about 300 nautical miles from Nakhon Phanom, concentrating on roads to the south of Mu Gia pass—Routes 12, 23, and 911. RLAF observers flew with some U.S. FAC's to validate targets before allowing the F-100's, F-105's, and AC-47's to strike. The FAC pilots worked with both ground air liaison officers and road reconnaissance teams inside Laos who helped pinpoint targets. Although Cricket was a relatively minor operation, it proved quite effective in destroying or damaging enemy trucks and supplies.

In early 1966 Tiger Hound operations gathered momentum with each passing month. In March, for example, tactical air strikes destroyed an estimated 210 trucks and damaged about 278 more. SAC B-52's flew more than 400 sorties in the first half of the year, conducting saturation strikes on roads to block enemy traffic and to hit troop encampments, supply dumps, and truck parks. By May, Tiger Hound attacks had destroyed or damaged an estimated 3,000 structures, 1,400 trucks, scores of bridges, and more than 200 automatic weapon and antiaircraft positions.

Recognizing the need for aircraft with a long loitering capability to help

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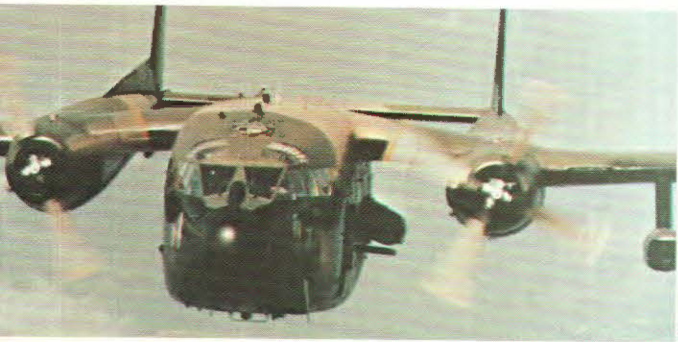
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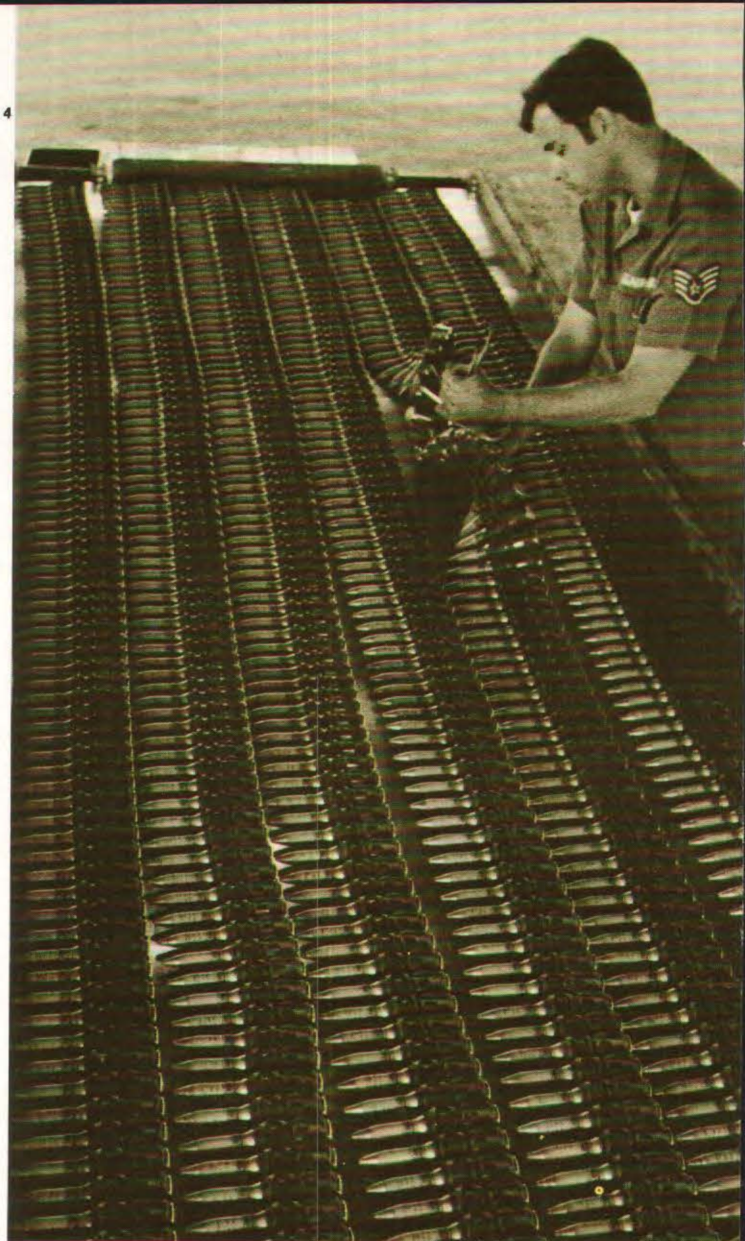
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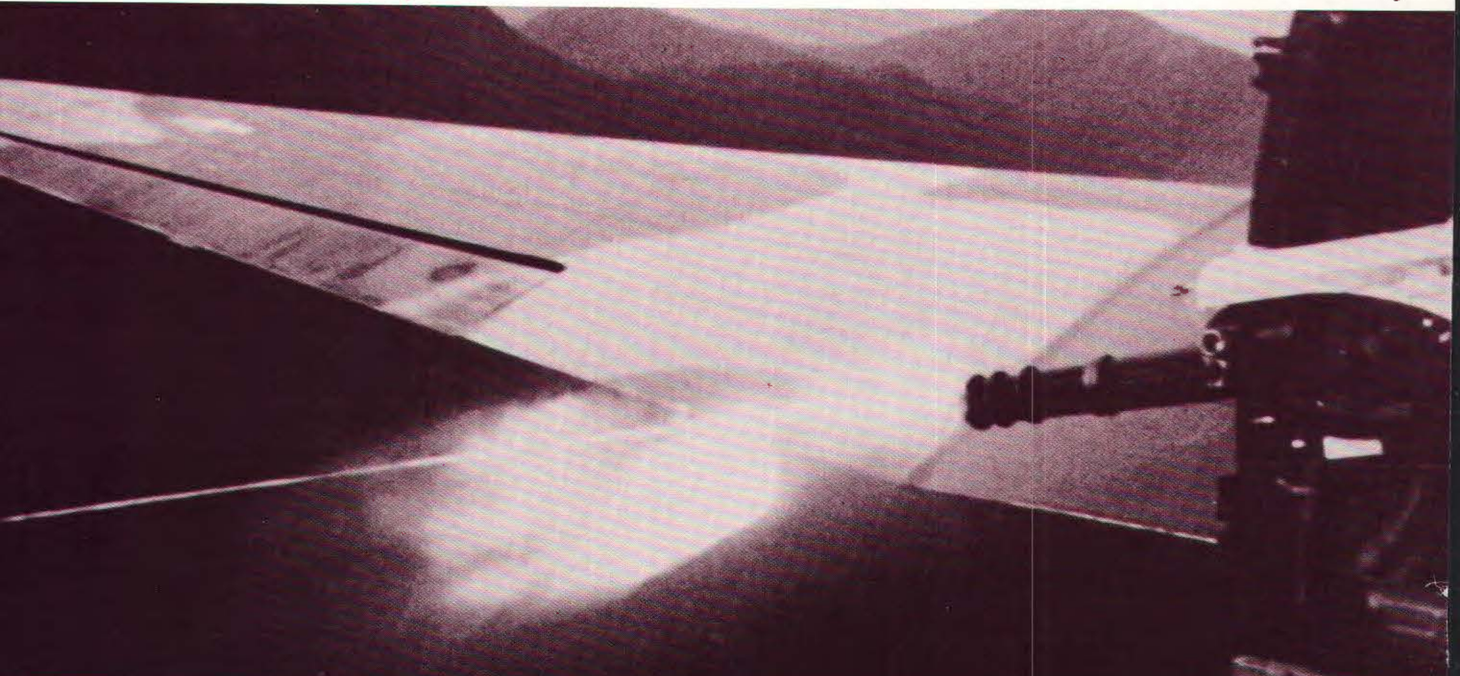

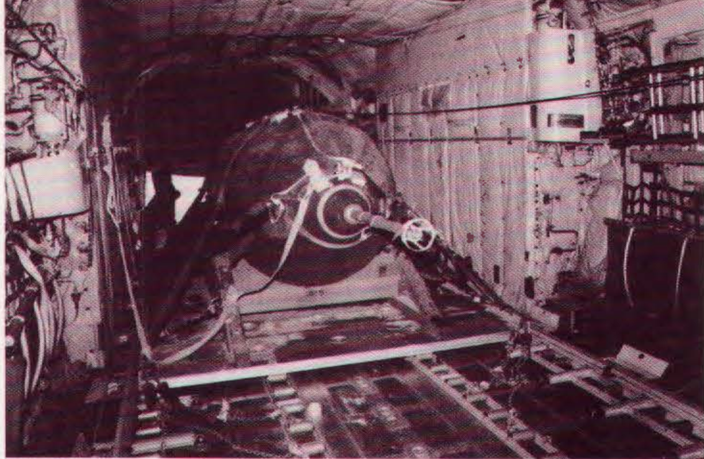

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(1) View of an AC-119K 20-mm cannon. (2) AC-119K gunship. (3) An AC-47 fires its miniguns. (4) Loading 20-mm ammunition on a gunship. (5-6) 15,000-lb bomb used to create jungle landing zones. (7) An AC-130 gunship at Nha Trang AB. (8) Servicing a 20-mm cannon.

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locate and attack an enemy concealed by jungle or weather, the Air Force deployed eight slow, nonjet A-26's (of World War II vintage which were re-equipped) to Nakhon Phanom in June 1966. Used in both a hunter and killer role against trucks, these aircraft replaced the older-model AC-47 gunships (which were later succeeded by improved AC-119 and AC-130 gunships). Also in June, the Air Force installed an MSQ-77 Skyspot radar at the base. Its 200-mile range permitted more accurate bombing day or night and in poor weather. The enemy reacted to the increased tempo of air operations by deploying more AAA weapons which took a steady toll of the attacking aircraft.

By May 1966 they had downed 22 U.S. aircraft in the Steel Tiger/Tiger Hound areas. With the onset of the annual southwest monsoons in the spring, air effectiveness again diminished as did the pace of infiltration. To maintain their supply flow southward, the Communists shifted to roads in North Vietnam (route package 1) above the DMZ.

In October 1966, when drier weather returned, the enemy resumed large-scale supply movements and Steel Tiger and Tiger Hound operations intensified once more. From January through April 1967, the dry months of the year in the Laotian panhandle, American pilots flew 2,900 to 3,400 strike sorties per month. In February, in undertaking one of the largest sustained air assaults in Laos, they flew 500 sorties against enemy concentrations opposite Kontum province in South Vietnam, thereby aiding considerably Allied operations against the Communists in that threatened province.

Subsequently, air operational rules were changed following the division of the Steel Tiger/Tiger Hound areas into four zones. In zone one, closest to South Vietnam, pilots had relative freedom to strike targets of opportunity. However, there were progressively more stringent strike rules governing the three zones westward. In those areas targets could not be hit unless authorized by Laotian officers, low-flying U.S. FAC's, or by the office of the American ambassador in Vientiane. In bad weather, all missions had to be under Skyspot radar control.

To maintain an umbrella of air power over the Ho Chi Minh trail, USAF commanders tried new tactics and introduced more specially-equipped aircraft. They also inaugurated the practice of having FAC pilots fly over "target boxes" in the same geographical area on a daily basis. This enabled them to become familiar with the terrain, aided in the detection of the enemy's presence, and simplified the command and control of strike aircraft. The use of additional ground reconnaissance teams led to the discovery of numerous concealed targets or target areas for air strikes. SAC B-52 bombers stepped up their operations, flying 1,718 sorties in the Laotian panhandle in 1967, nearly triple the 617 sorties flown in 1966. The Royal Laotian Air Force flew more T-28 FAC and strike missions, although its main effort continued to be in the Barrel Roll area of northern Laos.

The Air Force's most effective "truck killers" were the AC-119 and AC-130 gunships, the B-57, a few C-123's equipped with special detection devices and BLU bomblet cannisters, and the A-26. Carrying flares and detection devices, these aircraft flew mostly at night when Communist truck travel was heaviest. They also could serve as FAC's, calling in "fast movers" such as F-4C Phantoms for additional strikes. Other aircraft with a FAC capability included Air Force A-1E's, Navy P-1's. and RLAF T-28's. In 1967 O-2's began replacing O-1's and in 1968 the Air Force introduced the larger OV-10 Forward Air Control aircraft. The nighttime detection capability of a few tactical aircraft was en-

hanced by equipping them with the Starlight Scope, originally developed by the Army for its M-16 rifle. During the last 2 months of 1967 an important advance was made in the Allies' ability to detect enemy movements through the Laotian panhandle. This was a rudimentary, air-supported electronic anti-infiltration system, which consisted of "strings" of seismic and acoustic sensors dropped from aircraft in designated jungle areas. These devices, planted along a number of infiltration roads and trails, almost at once began picking up the sounds and movements of enemy vehicular traffic and personnel movements. The information was transmitted to a high-flying EC-121 which, in turn, retransmitted it to an Air Force infiltration surveillance center at Nakhon Phanom. There data were collated with other intelligence information.

The anti-infiltration detection system had a succession of nicknames, with Igloo White being best known and used the longest. It was another technological innovation for locating an enemy shielded by terrain or bad weather. A unit organized under the command of Air Force Brig. Gen. William P. McBride, named Task Force Alpha, built and operated the infiltration surveillance center. To dispense the sensors, the Air Force relied upon a small number of A-1E's, CH-3 helicopters, and also some F-4D's. Navy OP-2E aircraft also were employed to dispense the sensors. In January-February 1968, after the Communists laid siege to the Marine base at Khe Sanh, General Westmoreland diverted Task Force Alpha resources to its defense. Dropped in the vicinity of the base, the sensors in one instance were able to detect North Vietnamese troop movements and preparations for a large-scale ground assault against the Marine positions. Thus alerted, the threat was thwarted and beaten back by heavy air strikes and Marine artillery fire.

Commando Hunt Operations

As was noted in Chapter III, the Tet offensive and siege of Khe Sanh triggered changes in U.S. policy in Southeast Asia. On 31 March 1968, President Johnson ordered an end to all bombing of North Vietnam above the 19th parallel to facilitate peace negotiations, hopefully paving the way for withdrawal of American troops from the theater while simultaneously strengthening Saigon's military forces. While U.S. air power hit hard at enemy infiltration through the DMZ, the annual southwest monsoon once again reduced Communist traffic in the Laos panhandle and air action against it.

In November 1968, on the basis of an "understanding" reached with Hanoi, the President ended all attacks upon North Vietnam. The enemy threat to South Vietnam, however, remained undiminished. Abatement of the rainy season in Laos, which coincided with the end of all bombing of the North, found infiltration down the Ho Chi Minh trail heavier than ever. To reduce it, the Air Force, Navy, and Marines launched a new air campaign nicknamed Commando Hunt. Its major objectives were to destroy as many supplies as possible being moved down the trail, to tie down enemy manpower, and to further test the effectiveness of the sensor system. Initial operations were confined roughly to a 1,700 square-mile sector of Laos contiguous to South Vietnam. The Air Force employed an array of FAC, strike, and reconnaissance aircraft, B-52's, C-130 airborne battlefield command and control centers, and AC-47 and AC-130 gunships. The gunships proved especially valuable in interdicting enemy truck traffic. In 1969, AC-119 gunships—some manned by Air Force reservists mobilized by President Johnson in May 1968—also flew missions against the trail.

Initially, about 40 percent of all sorties attempted to block narrow road

passes, 35 percent hit truck parks and storage areas, 15 percent truck traffic, and 10 percent enemy AAA positions. By the end of April, after 6 months of these operations, U.S. analysts believed that the Commando Hunt operations had destroyed or damaged enough vehicles and supplies to force the Communists to rely more heavily on water routes including the Cambodian port of Kompong Som (apparently with the acquiescence of Cambodian officials). As the pace of the aerial assault quickened, the number of tactical sorties rose from about 4,700 in October 1968, to 12,800 in November, and 15,100 in December. B-52 sorties jumped from 273 in October to more than 600 for each of the last 2 months of the year. During 1968 SAC bombers logged 3,377 sorties over the Laotian panhandle, nearly double the total for 1967. Somewhat greater operational flexibility allowed air commanders in early 1969 facilitated the upward sortie trend. Notwithstanding their rising materiel losses, the Communists doggedly continued to send a substantial flow of supplies through Laos into South Vietnam.

Commando Hunt II, begun in May 1969, coincided with the beginning of the annual southwest monsoon and the usual reduction of enemy movements and U.S. operations over southern Laos. American pilots nonetheless continued to harass or hamper the efforts of the Communists to repair roads and trails washed out by floods. Within North Vietnam, the enemy assembled more manpower, trucks, and watercraft and stockpiled supplies near the Laos border to prepare for the next infiltration surge through Laos after the monsoon abated. They also built a POL pipeline into the southern Laotian panhandle and augmented considerably their antiaircraft defenses. This activity was facilitated greatly, of course, by the end of the bombing of the North and the continued, unrestricted flow of trucks,

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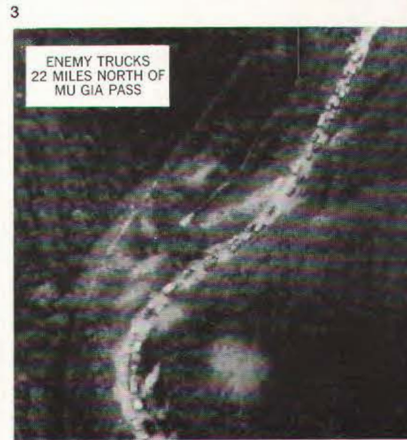

(1) A Chinese built truck, captured in Laos, 1971. (2) U.S. Army helicopters supported Lam Son 719 in early 1971. (4) Captured Soviet PT-76 amphibious tank. (5) A North Vietnamese antiaircraft gun captured in Laos by Saigon's troops in 1971. (6) Gunship fires on enemy truck traffic in Laos.

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guns, equipment, and supplies from China or through Haiphong and other seaports. Gen. George S. Brown, Seventh Air Force commander (August 1968 to September 1970), observed that the enemy had a "free ride" to the borders of Laos and South Vietnam.

Commando Hunt III, launched as the dry season began in November 1969, again witnessed more intense air operations against an expanded flow of enemy troops and supplies southward. The use of many seismic and acoustic sensors, unaffected by darkness and weather, provided considerable data on NVA movements and resulted frequently in more timely air strikes. The AC-119 and AC-130 gunships, and C-123's equipped with bomblet cannisters continued to be the best truck killers. Of the total number of trucks claimed destroyed or damaged between late 1969 and early 1970 (one estimate ranged upwards to 10,000 trucks), the gunships and C-123's were credited with about 48 percent, although they flew a relatively small number of total Commando Hunt sorties. Some analysts believed that no more than 33 percent of the supplies that entered the Ho Chi Minh trail reached South Vietnam while the rest were destroyed, damaged, or consumed en route.

During Commando Hunt III, the tempo of air operations declined gradually. Washington authorities, confident that American objectives in Southeast Asia were being achieved, imposed budgetary limits on the overall U.S. war effort which led to some reduction in Air Force and Navy sortie ceilings. Sortie requirements were reduced beginning 26 February 1970 when enemy traffic in southern Laos suddenly dropped to half of the volume observed in the preceding weeks. Meanwhile, there were requests to use air assets elsewhere. In February 1970, for example, numerous tactical and B-52 missions—the latter for the first time—were diverted to the Barrel Roll

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(1) Reconnaissance photo of camouflaged truck in Laos. (2) Truck park on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. (3) A military camp located at the Mu Gia pass, North Vietnam. (4) Enemy truck traffic heading towards the Mu Gia pass. (5) A camouflaged enemy truck was spotted and destroyed. (6) Aerial interdiction operations on Ho Chi Minh trail. (7) Road interdiction near a Mu Gia pass choke point.

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Ho Chi Minh Trail Infiltration Routes

NORTH VIETNAM
101
103
911
1A
DEMARCATION LINE
512
102
1036
914
922
MUONG
NONG
610
611
DANANG
607
96
165
THAILAND
614
QUANG NGAI
110
609
PLEIKU
QUI NHON
702
701
CAMBODIA
740
NHA TRANG
PHNOM
PENH
4
TAY NINH
704
SAIGON
705
CAN THO

LEGEND

PERSONNEL ROUTES.
LOGISTICAL ROUTES.
BASE AREAS.

sector of northern Laos to counter stepped up Pathet Lao-North Vietnamese activity there. Other diversions occurred in April and May 1970, when U.S. and South Vietnamese troops invaded the "Parrot's Beak" and "Fishhook" regions of Cambodia to attack Communist base areas and supply concentrations. In fact, air requirements in Cambodia, South Vietnam, and northern Laos for the time being took precedence over those in southern Laos.

Lam Son 719

Late in 1970, attention again was directed to an upsurge of Communist movements in the Laos panhandle. There was evidence of considerable stockpiling around Tchepone, a supply hub on the upper end of the Ho Chi Minh trail, not far from the DMZ. The enemy seemed to be preparing for a major ground offensive into South Vietnam's two northernmost provinces, Quang Tri and Thau Thien.

As the enemy buildup grew, U.S. and South Vietnamese authorities decided to conduct a military thrust across a portion of the Ho Chi Minh trail toward Tchepone with the objective of thwarting the NVA attack and cutting a segment of the infiltration route. As in the earlier invasion of Cambodia, the incursion into Laos promised to "buy time" to insure success of Vietnamization and the withdrawal of U.S. and Allied troops from South Vietnam. Because Congress had prohibited the use of American ground forces in Laos, only South Vietnamese troops were committed to the invasion, supported primarily by U.S. air power. Nicknamed Lam Son 719, the operation was conducted between January and April 1971. Air assets earmarked earlier for Commando Hunt V (October 1970 to April 1971) were diverted to Lam Son 719.

The first phase of the joint South Vietnamese-American undertaking began on 30 October when U.S. ground troops in Quang Tri province cleared an area near the Laotian border in order to establish logistical bases at Khe Sanh and the Vandegrift (Marine) camp. Construction of a new assault air strip and stockpiling of fuel and supplies followed. Air Force C-123 and C-130 transports played a major preparatory role, flying about 1,900 sorties to airlift 12,846 personnel, mostly South Vietnamese troops, and 19,900 tons of cargo to the jump-off areas.

The invasion was launched on 8 February 1971. South Vietnamese troops—drawn from a ranger, airborne, and ARVN infantry division and including some mechanized elements —fought for the first time without accompanying U.S. advisors. Initially, a mechanized unit rolled across the border to establish and secure land lines, while other ARVN troops were airlifted by helicopter to the A Luoi area, south of Route 9 leading to Tchepone. In support of the Vietnamese, the Air Force operated a tactical air control system from the forward direct air support center (DASC) set up and collocated with the U.S. XXIV Corps forward command post at Quang Tri. It also provided most of the O-2 and OV-10 FAC aircraft.

English-speaking Vietnamese flew with the Air Force FAC pilots and aboard C-130 aerial command posts to bridge language difficulties between Vietnamese commanders and ground personnel. Other participating USAF aircraft included F-100's, F-4C's, AC-119's, AC-130's, and B-52's—all for direct support or interdiction purposes. Also supporting the operation were RF-4C's for reconnaissance, A-1E's for air cover rescue missions, and KC-135's for air refueling. C-130, C-123, and C-7 transports airlifted more than 30,000 tons during the invasion. U.S. Marine and Navy aircraft provided considerable tactical support and the Army employed helicopter gunships and

hundreds of other helicopters for troop and supply airlift. The VNAF also provided combat and airlift support.

By the end of the first day, 6,200 South Vietnamese troops were in Laos, most of them airlifted to predetermined locations. They built fire bases, conducted patrols, and uncovered numerous supply and ammunition caches. The bodies of many NVA troops were found, killed by air strikes. By 12 February about 10,000 South Vietnamese were in Laos and shortly after their strength peaked at about 17,000. Enemy resistance initially was light to moderate. Meanwhile, U.S. aircraft continued to strike heavily at NVA positions and their LOC's. At night Air Force FAC's, flareships, and gunships provided cover for friendly troops; on 14 February the B-52's launched their first close air support strike. By the 23d, the B-52's had flown 399 sorties, which helped clear the path for the advancing Vietnamese and to prepare helicopter landing zones. Air Force C-130's joined in, unloading 15,000-pound bombs on suspected enemy concentrations and using them to create instant helicopter landing areas.

On 25 February 1971, the North Vietnamese launched a counter offensive. They first attacked the forward support base at A Luoi and expanded their operations in the ensuing 5 days. The size and intensity of their response proved greater than anticipated. Some 24,000 NVA combat troops—supported by about 11,000 support personnel—reached the vicinity of the forward elements of the South Vietnamese force moving westward. The NVA troops were equipped with about 120 tanks, considerable artillery, and a profusion of antiaircraft automatic weapons. The AA guns soon began taking a heavy toll of low-flying U.S. Army helicopters.

With the help of fixed-wing air power, the South Vietnamese briefly contained the enemy assaults and, on 3 March, they resumed their westward drive. On the 7th three battalions reached the area around the logistic hub of Tchepone, the principal objective, where they were joined by two other battalions. Enemy resistance, at first relatively light, grew stiffer between 3-10 March as NVA reinforcements arrived in the Tchepone area. Other NVA attacks of growing strength began to hit the ARVN troops and fire-bases stretching from South Vietnam's border to Tchepone. A number of enemy ambushes inflicted heavy casualties on the invaders.

Faced with mounting personnel and equipment losses, Lt. Gen. Hoang Xuan Lam, the commander of the invasion forces, decided to cut short the operation and ordered a withdrawal. In the hasty retreat that followed, with many personnel being evacuated by helicopter, the South Vietnamese abandoned large quantities of armor, tanks, trucks, and other military hardware. Intense enemy ground fire made helicopter missions extremely dangerous and scores were shot down or seriously damaged, leading to panic among many ARVN troops. However, under massive tactical and B-52 air cover, virtually all South Vietnamese troops were extricated by 24 March. A number of ground reconnaissance units fought a rearguard action as Lam Son 719 officially ended on 6 April.

The cost was high to both sides. The North Vietnamese suffered an estimated 14,500 personnel killed, about 4,800 by air strikes, and unknown numbers of wounded. Aircraft were credited with destroying the greatest part of about 20,000 tons of food and ammunition and 156,000 gallons of fuel. About 1,530 trucks were destroyed and 480 damaged and a NVA tank regiment—with about 74 tanks destroyed and another 24 damaged—was virtually wiped out. The enemy also lost an estimated 6,000 weapons. The South

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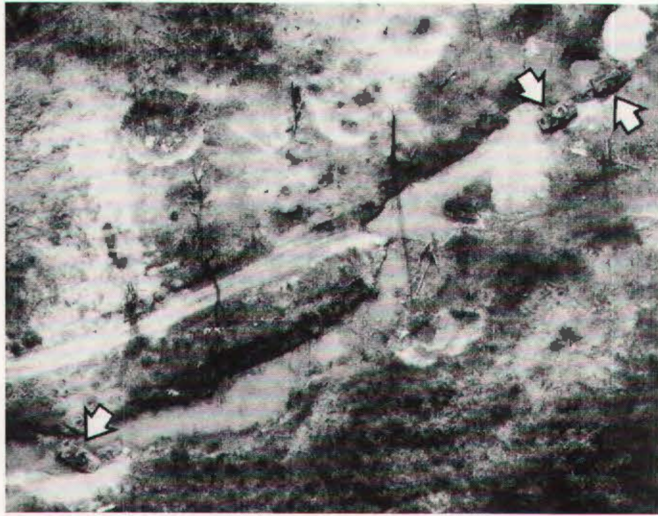
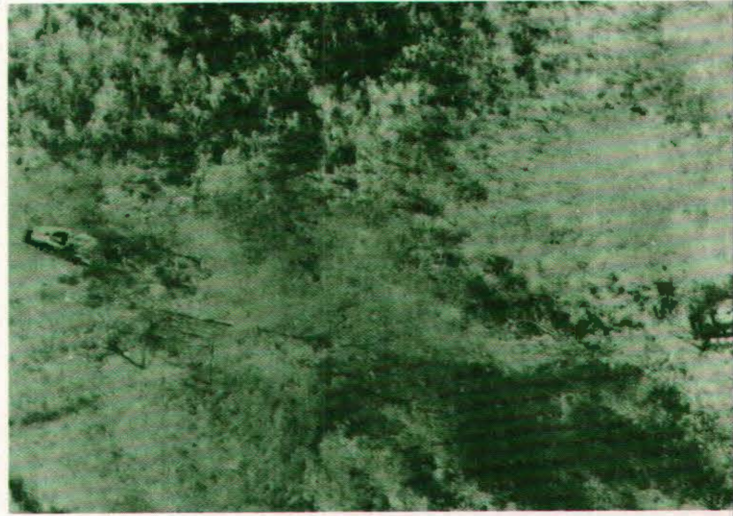
Vietnamese suffered 1,519 killed, 5,423 wounded, and 651 missing in action. ARVN equipment destroyed or captured included about 75 tanks, many armored personnel carriers, 198 crew-served weapons, and about 3,000 individual weapons.

American air support had been massive. More than 8,000 tactical air sorties were flown and some 20,000 tons of ordnance dropped. The B-52's flew 1,358 sorties in direct support of the South Vietnamese troops. U.S. Army helicopters flew thousands of sorties in airlifting troops into and out of Laos, resupplying units, and evacuating casualties. Considering the magnitude of the air effort and the North Vietnamese response to it, aircraft losses were relatively small. The Air Force lost six aircraft, the Navy one. U.S. Army helicopters suffered the heaviest attrition. At least 107 were destroyed and upwards of 600 damaged, many so badly that they would not fly again. American casualties totalled 176 killed, 1,042 wounded, and 42 missing in action. One lesson of Lam Son 719 was that neither the invasion nor the withdrawal would have been possible without the extensive use of air power.

Following the operation, both sides were forced to reconstitute and re-





(1) U.S. fighter bombers destroy enemy truck in Laos. (2) Four enemy trucks damaged by U.S. aircraft in vicinity of the Mu Gia pass. (3) Air Force fighter-bombers attacked enemy petroleum drum cache on the Ho Chi Minh trail. (4) Three Soviet PT-76 tanks damaged by Air Force fighter bombers. (5) Enemy tanks destroyed in Laos.

equip many of their units. Having suffered by far the largest number of casualties, the North Vietnamese had to replace and retrain many personnel. They also had to repair roads, trails, bridges, and restock stores of food, POL, and ammunition in the battle area. As a consequence, Hanoi's plans for a new major offensive against South Vietnam suffered a temporary setback and bought additional time for Washington and Saigon to advance the on-going Vietnamization program.

Additional Commando Hunt Campaigns

During the annual May to October monsoon in 1971, when Commando Hunt operations diminished, the North Vietnamese maintained an above normal level of activity in southern Laos. They added about 140 miles of new roads to the Ho Chi Minh trail which, by October, brought the total to 2,170 miles—including single lanes, multiple parallel routes, by-passes, and spur roads. They also expanded their air defenses. By late 1971, about 344 antiaircraft guns and thousands of smaller automatic weapons defended vital points along the trail. A number of SA-2 missile sites on the North Vietnamese border and in Laos posed a new threat, as did rebuilt air bases in southern North Vietnam. The latter enabled MIG pilots to challenge or harass Commando Hunt aircraft. As more North Vietnamese troops arrived, American officials estimated enemy strength in Laos—south and north—at about 96,000. In Cambodia there were about 63,000 North Vietnamese and in South Vietnam about 200,000.

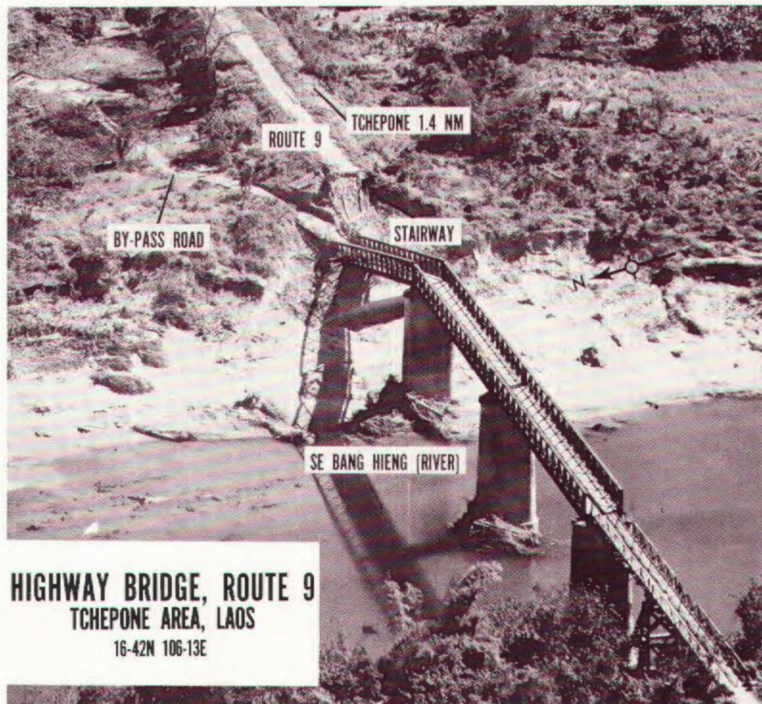
Thus, with the onset of the dry season in late 1971, the Communist threat again was formidable. To counter it, the Air Force launched Commando Hunt VII, extending it beyond the Steel Tiger area of southern Laos. However, there were fewer U.S. aircraft available for Laos because of competing requirements in Cambodia, and North Vietnam where "protective reaction" strikes were under way, and because of U.S. budget cutbacks and the consequent withdrawal of U.S. air and ground units. To compensate for fewer U.S. aircraft, USAF officials called for greater participation in Commando Hunt VII by the indigenous air forces of Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam, more flexible employment of U.S. tactical and B-52 aircraft, and the use of the newest technological advances for interdiction.

By 1971, U.S. research and develop-

ment activities had wrought many changes in interdiction techniques and ordnance. OV-10 FAC aircraft were now able to direct laser-guided bombs dropped by fighter aircraft flying day or night missions, and also were more effective in assisting air rescue operations. The target-detection and truck-killing capability of the B-57G and the AC-119 and AC-130 gunships had been upgraded. The AC-130 was equipped with a variety of target acquisition devices, including low-light-level television, illuminators, beacon-tracking radar, and infrared sensors. LORAN-equipped F-4's could lead other aircraft not so equipped to targets at night or in bad weather. The Task Force Alpha infiltration center at Nakhon Phanom assumed a more direct operational role while continuing to collect, analyze, and disseminate sensor-gathered data on enemy movements. And pilots had available more deadly types of cluster bombs, more accurate laser-guided bombs, and improved aircraft guns.

Commando Hunt VII operations in the Steel Tiger area of Laos were conducted in three phases. Beginning with Phase I on 1 November 1971, strike aircraft concentrated on hitting several entry points from North Vietnam into Laos, principally the Mu Gia, Ban Karai, and Ban Raving passes and the western end of the DMZ at the 17th parallel. During Phase II, as the North Vietnamese moved supplies further southward along roads and trails in the Laotian panhandle, strike aircraft shifted attacks to those routes in order to create "blocking belts" at key transportation points or areas. These were formed first by cutting a road with laser-guided bombs and then seeding the road area with air-dropped land mines. When ground sensors detected the enemy clearing minefields or bypassing the belt area, aircraft were quickly dispatched to the scene. During Phase III operations in early 1972, U.S. tactical and B-52 aircraft shifted their attacks to seven principal exit points from Laos into South Vietnam and Cambodia.

Commando Hunt VII operations were completed at the end of March 1972. By then, U.S. tactical aircraft had flown about 31,500 sorties in the Laotian panhandle, with the Air Force flying more than half of this total. As previously, the B-52's participated, flying 3,176 strikes. About 70 percent of the tactical missions were directed against interdiction points, trucks, and storage areas. Many of the strikes triggered explosions and secondary fires, and analysts estimated that the enemy lost many of his trucks and a substantial part of about 31,000 tons of supplies moving through southern Laos during the 5-month campaign. Despite intense enemy AAA fire in some areas, the United States lost only 13 aircraft in the Steel Tiger sector during Commando Hunt VII.



This bridge in the Tchepone areas of Laos, destroyed in early 1964, was rebuilt by enemy forces and later downed again.

USAF aircraft interdicted this bridge in Laos in 1969.

Air Power Shifts Again

While absorbing its losses in Laos, the Hanoi regime remained free from air attacks north of the DMZ, except for occasional protective reaction air strikes, to build up its troop strength and supplies. In April 1972, as the northeast monsoon began to abate, the North Vietnamese launched their "spring offensive," sending about 100, 000 men into northern South Vietnam. The United States responded forcefully, with President Nixon ordering mining harbors of the North for the first time, renewed regular strikes above the DMZ, and a buildup of U.S. units to provide air support to South Vietnamese forces. Augmented by 50 more B-52's, American air units again pounded the enemy. By July, the NVA offensive had been contained, but the North Vietnamese had succeeded in seizing large portions of South Vietnamese territory in the northern and western portions of the Republic of Vietnam. As a result of Hanoi's spring invasion of South Vietnam, air strikes in Laos dropped to the lowest level since 1965. In September the tempo increased with B-52's concentrating on the Steel Tiger area and tactical aircraft hitting enemy troops in the northern part of the country. In October, as the southwest monsoon declined, the North Vietnamese for the first time in several years did not step up drastically their infiltration activity in southern Laos. The Air Force, in turn, did not launch another Commando Hunt campaign. It continued, however, to fly air strikes against segments of the Ho Chi Minh trail, employing for the first time the A-7D Corsair II for close air support of friendly Lao units and the swept-wing F-111 for armed reconnaissance. Both aircraft possessed sophisticated radar equipment for poor weather operations.

These air missions continued at a low but steady pace until 18 December 1972, when Linebacker II operations were launched against the North Vietnamese capital area, including the port of Haiphong. The 11-day Linebacker II campaign was followed on 23 January 1973 by the signing of an accord, effective on the 28th, Saigon time, between the United States and North Vietnam providing for the release of all American and allied prisoners of war in exchange for a U.S. withdrawal of all combat forces from South Vietnam. However, tactical and B-52 sorties continued to be flown in the Laotian panhandle until 21 February 1973, when the rival Laotian factions reached a ceasefire agreement. The bombing, halted the next day, was renewed on 23 February at the request of the Vientiane government because of ceasefire violations. The B-52's returned to action in April, again in connection with a breakdown in the ceasefire. With the completion of these strikes against targets on the Plain of Jars, all American air operations in Laos ceased.

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Chapter VI

Air Operations over Northern Laos

After nearly 9 years of operations over northern Laos, the Air Force on 17 April 1973 flew its last combat sortie in support of the Royal Laotian Government (RLG). Unlike the Steel Tiger interdiction strikes against North Vietnamese traffic on the Ho Chi Minh trail in the Laotian panhandle discussed above, the northern operations, known as Barrel Roll, primarily supported friendly government ground forces—the Royal Laotian Army and Neutralist troops but especially the army of Maj. Gen. Vang Pao, consisting of about 5,000 CIA-trained Meo tribesmen, a mountain people living within Laos. Operating mostly as irregulars, the Meos did much of the fighting, helping to defend an area which included the capital at Vientiane and the politically important Plain of Jars. Northeast of the plain were Sam Neua province, the Pathet Lao capital of the same name, and major east-west roads leading to and from North Vietnam.

Air Force operations over northern Laos had their origins in the failure of the Geneva Accords of 23 July 1962. Signed by the United States, the Soviet Union, the two Vietnams, and eight other countries, the agreement recognized Laos as a neutral, independent country to be ruled by a tripartite government divided among Rightists, Neutralists, and the Pathet Lao. Foreign military personnel—other than accredited military attaches—were prohibited from being stationed in Laos. Thus, the 750-man U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group—which had been in Laos for about 2 years before the accords were signed—had to leave, its departure being monitored by the International Control Commission. But on the other side, North Vietnamese forces lingered on in Pathet Lao territory and prevented the ICC from inspections by obstructive tactics which were abetted by the Communist member of the Commission.

When efforts by Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma to form a tripartite coalition government proved unsuccessful, he requested American economic and military aid, including supplies, spare parts, and aircraft for the Royal Laotian Air Force. T-28 fighter-bombers were subsequently delivered to the RLAF, replacing worn-out T-6's. To manage the increased materiel flow, the United States maintained in its embassy in Laos a small contingent of civilians (most of them retired military men). In the spring of 1964, after Pathet Lao and NVA forces launched attacks against Neutralist forces on the Plain of Jars, government troops evacuated the area. This prompted the Neutralist general, Kong Le, to warn RLG officials that without immediate air support all would be lost to the Communists.

Thereafter, with Washington's approval, Leonard Unger, the U.S. ambassador in Vientiane, released the fuzes for the bombs previously delivered and allowed the Laotian Air Force to attack with live ordnance. He also proposed, and Souvanna Phouma approved the use of low-level reconnaissance sorties in early June 1964. Souvanna authorized the use of tactical fighters to accompany the unarmed

Airman 1st Class Harold P. Johnson stands by as Capt. R.P. Roseclans, Jr., prepares to taxi his A-1E at Udorn AB, Thailand, 1968.

jets after one of the reconnaissance aircraft was lost on 6 June. Following the second loss of a Yankee Team aircraft, President Johnson ordered a retaliatory strike by eight F-100's on 9 June against a Communist AAA installation at Xieng Khouang on the Plain of Jars.

Three months earlier, in response to Souvanna Phouma's request for help to the RLAF, the Air Force deployed Detachment 6, 1st Air Commando Wing, to Udorn, Thailand. Two of its major jobs were to establish a T-28 flight checkout system for Laotian pilots and to assist with aircraft maintenance. Forty-one airmen, along with four aircraft, opened for business at Udorn in April 1964. Subsequently, as support of friendly ground operations increased, Air Force personnel were assigned to work as ground controllers or forward air guides in Laos, since few Laotians could speak English and none were familiar with procedures for directing air strikes against enemy positions. In early 1965, Detachment 6 began training English-speaking Lao and Meo personnel to direct air strikes from the ground. As these personnel became proficient, USAF airmen withdrew from this role.

When Barrel Roll operations got under way in December 1964, the U.S. ambassador in Vientiane as head of the "country team"—that is, all Americans officially assigned to the embassy—assumed responsibility for the direction, coordination, and supervision of U.S. military activities—almost entirely air—in support of the government. The Air Force attache and a small contingent of military and CIA personnel assisted him.

Although Unger and his successors—Ambassadors William H. Sullivan and G. McMurtrie Godley—did not concern themselves with details of operations (the number or types of planes employed), they validated all targets and none could be bombed without their permission. Strikes were limited to specific areas and conducted under strict rules of engagement.

As the tempo of operations increased, the Air Force in November 1965 established Headquarters 2d Air Division/Thirteenth Air Force at Udorn, some 45 miles from Vientiane to serve as a focal point for Laotian air support requests. The commander, a major general, as the senior Air Force representative in Thailand, had multiple responsibilities: he reported to the American ambassadors in Thailand and Laos on military matters in their respective areas; to the Commander, Thirteenth Air Force for administrative and logistic matters involving USAF units in Thailand; and to the Commander, Second Air Division in Saigon for the combat operations of those units. Thus, the Second Air Division actually issued the directives (the daily "frag" orders) for Barrel Roll missions in the Laotian panhandle. The Udorn headquarters in April 1966 was redesignated as 7th/13th Air Force following establishment of Seventh Air Force at Tan Son Nhut AB, South Vietnam.

The Effects of Weather

As elsewhere in Southeast Asia, the seasonal weather was a major factor in the ground struggle between government forces and the Pathet Lao/NVA in northern Laos. Enemy troops normally became active during the dry season between October and April. In the 6 months of the wet season that followed, the weaker government forces became active. Thus, with the onset of the dry season in the fall of 1965, enemy troops launched their largest offensive up to that time in an attempt to eliminate all government outposts on the Plain of Jars and establish secure lines of communication. The expanded fighting brought a sizable increase in the embassy workload and led the Secretary of Defense to increase the attaché staff to 117 military and 5 civilian personnel—42 of them from the Air Force.

The number of Air Force personnel continued to increase during the next several years until it totaled 125 in 1969. They helped establish Air Operations Centers within the five military regions of Laos, which were jointly manned by Laotian and USAF airmen to manage air support requests. In addition, the Air Force assigned forward air controllers to Royal Laotian Army units and Vang Pao's Meo forces as a means of overcoming the language barrier between them and the strike aircraft crews. Operating under the designation of Raven, these FAC's flew O–1's, U-17's, and T-28's on 6-month tours of duty. And, as necessary, the Air Force deployed a C-47 airborne battlefield command and control center to the area.

Despite the American air assistance, enemy forces overran a number of government posts in Sam Neua province in early 1966, including the key airfield at Na Khang—known as Lima Site 36 (LS-36)—which fell on 17 February. On 20 March a two-battalion enemy force seized a Neutralist stronghold and induced defection of its troops. To ease the pressure on friendly forces, USAF pilots flew 32 strike sorties daily, some with aircraft diverted from North Vietnam and the Ho Chi Minh trail.

The air strikes gradually took a heavy toll of enemy resources, destroying large quantities of supplies patiently built up over the previous year and slowing down his offensive. This success enabled Vang Pao's irregulars to take the offensive with the start of the wet season and recover a number of government posts, including Lima Site 36. By August 1966, the irregulars had reached Nam Bac, only 45 miles from the North Vietnamese border and a major point on the historic invasion corridor from the north. In effect, the Communist Pathet Lao dry season offensive of 1965-1966 had been a failure.

North Vietnam reacted to this turn of events by dispatching 14,000 first-line troops to northern Laos, bringing the total Communist strength to about 50,000 men for the start of the next dry season offensive. As the weather improved during the fall of 1966, enemy forces moved against government-controlled Lima Sites in northern Laos. By early January 1967 they had advanced to Na Khan where the Meo, supported by Thai T-28 pilots (trained by USAF instructors), drove them back. When the enemy tried to overrun LS-52, located some 20 miles from the Pathet Lao capital at Sam Neua, allied air power again saved the day. Frustrated by these setbacks, the Communists on 2 February mortared the Luang Prabang airfield, destroying eight aircraft and badly damaging three others as well as the air operations center. The attack was unprecedented, since both sides had always considered the royal capital immune.

The airfield attack had a major impact on the opposing forces. The government troops became demoralized while the enemy appeared to gain a new momentum. On 4 April, he again struck at LS-52, attacking from three sides. Adverse weather deprived the government troops of their air support and they quickly fled, only to fall into an ambush, and were severely mauled by the North Vietnamese. For the next 2 months, operations were at a low level. Then, on 16 July, the enemy again struck the airfield at Luang Prabang, destroying 10 or 11 T-28's along with a major portion of the government's ammunition supply. The raid left the RLAF with only 38 T-28's. Pending delivery of additional aircraft, Seventh Air Force in July diverted sorties from Rolling Thunder to take up the slack.

After slowly rebuilding his forces, Vang Pao on 2 August 1967 attacked and captured Muong Ngan, depriving the enemy of the year's rice harvest in that area. Both sides then built up

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(1) Munitions storage area at Vietiane, Laos, 1970. (2) 20,000 Laotian refugees were evacuated from Saravane in 2½ days by three American C-46 transports. (3) A De Havilland transport delivered supplies to remote Laotian bases. (4) An Air Force F-111 takes off from a U.S. base. (5-6) Damage caused by an enemy rocket attack which destroyed six aircraft and damaged three others at the Vientiane airport on 2 February 1967. (7) Royal Laotian forces captured this Soviet-built PT-76 tank on the Plain of Jars.

their forces in the Nam Bac valley in anticipation of the dry season offensive. The government tried to move first, but weather and inadequate logistic support produced costly delays. Then, in early September, the T-28's inadvertently bombed their own troops, who promptly fled. Subsequent air strikes were poorly coordinated and controlled and by mid-October the situation at Nam Bac was critical. A relief operation proved far too complicated to succeed, although Vang Pao's guerrilla force gradually fought its way toward Nam Bac. Finally, during the night of 14-15 January—with Vang Pao's force only 12 kilometers away—the Royal Laotian garrison abandoned the town and fled into the jungle. Of the 4,000-man garrison, only 1,400 were eventually accounted for. They left behind seven 105-mm howitzers, thirty-six 60-mm mortars, forty-two 57-mm recoilless rifles, and more than 1 million pounds of ammunition.

The Loss of Lima Site 85

Following this success, the enemy turned his attention to Lima Site 85, isolated on a 5,200-foot mountain 25 miles west of Sam Neua and 160 miles west of Hanoi, deep within Pathet Lao territory. Accessible from only one side of the mountain, LS-85 was near a 700-foot dirt landing strip which had been scratched out in a narrow valley several hundred feet below. In 1966 the Air Force installed a tactical air navigation system there, primarily for the direction of aircraft headed for North Vietnam and northern Laos. Late in 1967 the Air Force replaced the original facility with an all-weather navigation system, operated and maintained by 19 USAF personnel.

The increased activity on the mountain's heights aroused North Vietnamese suspicions and, on 12 January 1968—in one of the bizarre air actions of the war—Soviet-manufactured, single engine NVAF Colt aircraft (AN-2's) attacked the site, the crews firing machineguns out the windows. At this point an American helicopter with security forces aboard returned fire and shot down one Colt. A second NVAF plane crashed while attacking the site, and a third Colt was chased toward North Vietnam by the U.S. helicopter. The third aircraft was forced to crash land some 18 miles north of the site in Laos. Whereupon, the North Vietnamese sent units to seize LS-85. By 10 March they had captured the landing strip and then advanced up a supposedly invulnerable side to the top of the mountain, where they defeated in hand-to-hand combat some 100 Meo guarding the site. Once there, they methodically destroyed the radar equipment. Of the 19 Air Force personnel operating the equipment, 12 managed to escape and were rescued by helicopters, 4 bodies were seen in the ruins of the facility, and 3 remained unaccounted for.

Following the loss of Lima Site 85, the enemy launched a drive against Vang Pao's troops. Friendly outposts fell one by one while most Air Force and RLAF planes remained grounded by weather. By early May the Communists had massed five battalions at Na Khang, which was defended by some 1,500 men. At this point the weather improved, enabling Allied airmen to fly several hundred sorties which blunted the enemy thrust. In June Vang Pao went over to the offensive and drove the enemy back towards Sam Neua. Before the summer was over, his forces and other friendly troops--supported by some 700 Air Force sorties--had recaptured most of the posts and territory previously lost to the enemy.

At the beginning of the 1968 dry season, when the enemy normally launched his offensive, Vang Pao decided to seize the initiative by heading straight for Lima Site 85. In December, as his troops reached the mountain

site, they received heavy mortar fire from the enemy. Whereupon, Air Force FAC's directed numerous strikes against the Communist positions. Seventh Air Force allocated 250 sorties for the operation, 50 being flown daily for 5 days. After the enemy guns fell silent, the Meo recaptured the airstrip. It proved a transitory success; on Christmas Day three fresh Communist battalions from Sam Neua counterattacked and drove the Meo from the area. Lima Site 85 remained in enemy hands.

NVA troops also moved to regain control of Route 7 and the Plain of Jars. By late February they were threatening Lima Site 36, the scene of repeated fighting and the location of the only tactical air control system in northeast Laos. An all-out air effort was launched to save the site. However, so many aircraft were diverted to the scene that the FAC's found it necessary to return some to their original targets because they could not properly handle them. Unfortunately, the enemy troops had dispersed in small groups and the FAC's—assuming they were hidden in the jungle—directed most of the ordnance there. An AC-47 gunship also went to the support of the badly battered government troops. On 1 March, however, after all their officers had been killed, the Laotian troops abandoned LS-36 and withdrew under cover of USAF aircraft.

Following their capture of the site, the Communists turned their attention to Vang Pao's headquarters at Long Tieng (Lima Site 20A). As a countermove, Vang Pao proposed a three-pronged preemptive attack with air cover to seize the main towns on the Plain of Jars (including the provincial capital of Xieng Khouang), interdict Route 7 east and west of Ban Ban, and capture Tha Thom south of the plain. However, his American advisors urged a less ambitious offensive, which he accepted and which began on 23 March 1969. It involved a two-pronged attack with air support along the plain's western rim with separate advances to the enemy's rear. In advance of the attack, on 17 March, Seventh Air Force and RLAF units launched the first of a series of attacks against enemy targets. During the first 4 days, 261 Air Force and 43 RLAF sorties struck more than 600 enemy structures, including bunkers and trenches. Of 345 targets in the Xieng Khouang area, 192 were knocked out.

By the time these air operations ended on 7 April, the Allied air forces had flown 730 sorties. They were credited with causing hundreds of secondary explosions and fires but, more importantly, they enabled Vang Pao's troops to walk virtually unopposed into Xieng Khouang in late April, a feat thought impossible at the start of the campaign. There they found large caches of supplies, including trucks, jeeps, 37-mm guns, and armored personnel carriers.

Following the capture of Xieng Khouang, the Meo leader launched diversionary attacks on Routes 61 and 7 to force the enemy to withdraw from Routes 4 and 5 south and east of Muong Soui, the old Neutralist headquarters and gateway from the Plain of Jars to the major north-south road between the two Laotian capital cities of Vientiane and Luang Prabang. The Air Attaché in Vientiane requested an augmentation of 50 sorties a day for 5 days in addition to the 70 regular Barrel Roll sorties to support the operation. Unfortunately, bad weather interfered with bombing some 150 targets, and Vang Pao's troops met stiff resistance from enemy units sent from Sam Neua.

At the same time, NVA troops opened their offensive against Muong Soui. About 4,000 Neutralist troops backed by a 300-man Thai artillery unit, defended the town. Both sides

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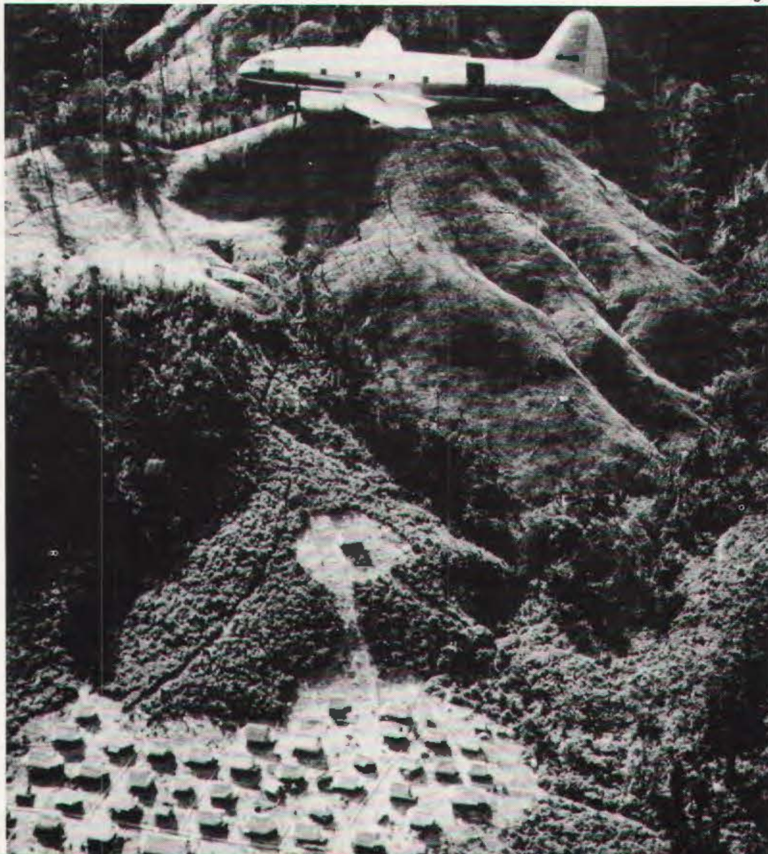

(1) This Soviet-made North Vietnamese AN-2 Colt aircraft was downed on 12 January 1968 by an American helicopter crew which returned the enemy's fire near LS-85. (2) Meo children, 10 to 12 years old, served as infantry troops in combat against Communist forces. (3) Jars and enemy caves on the Plains of Jars. (4) Captured enemy POL storage drums on the Plains of Jars. (5) An American C-46 on a resupply mission in Laos ©N.G.S. (6) In October 1961 key Laotian figures met at the Bridge of Peace Truce Talks to come to political agreements. The arrows identify (l. to r.) Gen. Phoumi Nosavan, Prince Buon Oum, and Prince Souvanna Phouma. (7) Maj. Gen. Kong Le (l.), commander of the Lao Neutralist forces in Laos, meets at the Pentagon with John T. McNaugton, Assistant Secretary of Defense (International Security Affairs), October 1965. (8) An 0-1 FAC aircraft at Vientiane, Laos, April 1970.

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realized that its capture would be a serious blow to Souvanna Phouma's government. Although the Neutralist force outnumbered the NVA troops by three to one, the latter had been ordered to take Muong Soui at all costs. At first light on 24 June 1969, as the NVA launched a tank-led attack, Raven FAC's directed air strikes which destroyed three and damaged a fourth tank. But the NVA pressed on and captured three 155-mm and five 105-mm guns, plus portions of the nearby dirt strip (Lima Site 108). The fighting then died down and remained sporadic for 3 days. By this time the Neutralist troops–traditionally poor fighters to begin with–were in complete disarray and an evacuation was ordered. Sixteen American helicopters covered by support aircraft managed to extract the Thais and Neutralists, including 200 families of the latter. Air strikes destroyed stores and equipment left behind, including nineteen 105-mm guns, 84 trucks and 1 helicopter previously shot down.

The loss of Muong Soui was a heavy blow to the Royal Government. Despite the general gloom, Vang Pao decided to go over to the offensive in an effort to retake the town. On 1 July 1969 the Air Force flew 50 strikes against Communist forces in Muong Soui, destroying 30 bunkers and producing 18 secondary explosions. Helped by their "flying artillery," the Meo met little resistance until they neared the town, when Vang Pao's plans went awry. Some 1,000 Neutralist troops committed to the operation did not move as planned and adverse weather hampered vitally needed air operations. On 8 July only six sorties could be flown; on the 12th, there were none. Without air support, the government advance slowed to a virtual standstill. On 12 July the enemy launched a counteroffensive which overran the government forces, inflicting heavy casualties and ending the operation.

A Major Government Victory

Vang Pao next proposed an operation which one embassy official called the "first major victory in the history of the Royal Government." His plan called for RLG troops to reestablish the government's presence on the southern fringes of the Plain of Jars, while his Meo guerrillas—operating from several Lima Sites (LS-2, LS-6, LS-32, and LS-201) in enemy-held territory—disrupted supply lines to the rear, particularly on Route 7. Poor weather again restricted air support. Thus, although Seventh Air Force scheduled 200 Barrel Roll sorties a day, less than half were executed. The weather improved somewhat in mid-August, and both the Meo and Royal Army forces were able to chalk up some good progress. The latter cleared an area along both the southeastern and southwestern edges of the plain. Vang Pao's guerrillas, supported by heavy air strikes, gathered momentum far beyond what was originally expected, cleared sizable areas around the Lima sites, and cut enemy lines of communication, particularly on Route 7. The jubilant general pressed his advantage, assisted by some 200 Barrel Roll sorties daily.

Aerial reconnaissance soon disclosed that Allied air operations had deprived the enemy of fuel and ammunition and caused him to abandon his tanks and trucks in major portions of the Plain of Jars. Government troops moved in quickly and on 12 September reoccupied Xieng Khouang, meeting no opposition. They captured enormous caches of supplies, including more than 3 million rounds of ammunition, 150,000 gallons of gasoline, 12 tanks, 30 trucks, and 13 jeeps. On 28 September government forces retook Muong Soui, again without opposition.

But with the start of the 1969-1970 dry season, the enemy once again became active, particularly along

Route 7 and the northern portions of the Plain of Jars, where battalion and company-sized engagements increased. Air sorties in the region declined as the Air Force shifted its attention to the Ho Chi Minh trail. Taking advantage of the air lull, fresh NVA troops moved back into northern Laos, and their construction crews set about repairing roads leading southward. By December, a vigorous North Vietnamese offensive was well under way. On the other hand, the Meo—untrained in conventional warfare—were weary. Indeed, after more than 8 years of fighting, they had suffered so many casualties that 10 and 12 year old boys formed a substantial portion of their force.

The results of the expanding fighting were predictable. On 12 January 1970, NVA forces captured Phou Nok Kok, the northeast entry point to the Plain of Jars on Route 7. In February Xieng Khouang and its airstrip fell as the youthful Meo panicked and fled at the sight of the advancing tanks. The town's garrison of 1,500 men also walked away.

At this point, the United States resorted to the B-52, using it for the first time to attack enemy positions in northern Laos. CINCPAC had earlier proposed such an operation when Communist forces had threatened the royal capital. But it was not until 7 months later that Washington authorities approved the use of the B-52's to support the Laotian government. The first raid took place on 17-18 February 1970. In 36 sorties, the B-52's dropped 1,078 tons of munitions on NVA and Pathet Lao positions on the Plain of Jars, causing many secondary explosions and inflicting numerous casualties. Thereafter, until 1973, the Stratofortresses flew several thousand sorties against enemy targets in northern Laos.

With the momentum gained from the easy capture of Xieng Khouang, the NVA moved on Muong Soui. On 24 February, at the first sign of the approaching enemy, the town's 120-man defending force fled. Thus, almost overnight the government position on the plain had collapsed and the positions of the two sides were back to that of a year earlier. At this point, Vang Pao's immediate concern was to secure his main headquarters at Long Tieng (LS-20A). He deployed his troops along a string of hilltop sites, forming them into a crescent-shaped line around the southwest corner of the plain. USAF crews supported him with numerous interdiction strikes along Route 7 in an attempt to hinder enemy supply movements. Additionally, after sunset each day, other aircraft seeded the road with antipersonnel mines to delay repair of the bombed roadbed. AC-47, AC-119, and AC-130 gunships flew nightly, attacking truck traffic. Despite these efforts, the enemy managed to circle undetected to the rear of Vang Pao's troops and, on 17 March 1970 appeared around Sam Thong and Long Tieng. Early on the 18th, the Communist troops were spotted only 2 miles from the camp, and the airstrip at Sam Thong came under heavy attack. Despite poor weather, Seventh Air Force dispatched strike aircraft but thick haze and smoke interfered with the pilots' ability to locate communist positions.

Just when things appeared darkest, Thai reinforcements arrived and positioned themselves on the south ridge. Other government reinforcements were airlifted in on the 19th, increasing friendly forces to about 2,000 men. The enemy, who had occupied portions of the skyline ridge overlooking the airstrip, began firing into the valley. RLAF T-28 strikes on their position initially had little effect. USAF A-1's and T-28's during the next 2 days joined in the attacks on the NVA troops.

On 24 March, with the weather clearing, USAF and RLAF sorties plus ground artillery pounded the enemy

LS 6

LS 32

Plain Of Jars

LS 201

BAN BAN

PHOU NOK KOK

NORTH VIETNAM

MUONG SOUI

LS 2

Xieng Khouang

BARTHELEMY PASS

Sam Thong

Long Tieng

LS 20A

MUONG NGAN

1

N. Laos & Plain Of Jars

CHINA
NVN
411
PHONG SALY
4
MUONG SING
19
NAM BAC
44
46
LS85
SAM NEUA
6
Muong Son
65
6
68
LAOS
43
Na Khang/LS36
LUANG PRABANG
61
BAN BAN
Muong Soui
7
7
Sala Phou Khoum
4/7
42
Long Tieng/LS20A
13
PAKSANE
5
Mekong River
VIENTIANE
THAILAND
Udorn RTAFB

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(1) Off-loading supplies from Lima Site 32 in Laos. (2) A 155-mm howitzer at Lima Site 15 at Ban Na, Laos.

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on the ridgeline. During the afternoon the Meo moved out to clear the NVA from the ridge, succeeded, and then beat off an enemy counterattack. The next day, as more Royal Army reinforcements arrived, the RLAF flew 43 sorties even though the weather again deteriorated. On 26 March, after Seventh Air Force launched 185 sorties, the NVA departed the area, with Vang Pao's troops following cautiously behind. Long Tieng had been saved.

During the next 2 years the struggle between government and Communist forces continued to swing back and forth with the monsoon seasons, but the enemy clearly was on the ascendancy. Thus, by March 1971—a year after Long Tieng had survived the enemy's 1970 offense—Communist troops returned to the skyline ridge and seized new positions, although this time they did not try to capture Vang Pao's headquarters. The Meo leader's subsequent wet season offensive, launched in April, initially was successful in driving NVA forces from the Long Tieng area. However, by late August the offensive had stalled.

The government had managed to hang on to certain positions on the northern portion of the Plain of Jars, but by year's end they had been virtually eliminated by five NVA regiments, which were equipped with 130-mm guns. These units then moved out against Long Tieng once more. To try to stop the enemy's advance, the Royal Government in January 1972 brought in reinforcements and launched some 1,500 strike sorties. The Seventh Air Force flew almost as many. Despite these attacks, the enemy by mid-March were back in the vicinity of Long Tieng and began employing their 130-mm guns to batter government positions. The guns, difficult to spot from the air, were even more difficult to hit. Several were finally destroyed by USAF laser-guided bombs, but the enemy replaced them and continued long distance shelling. At the start of the wet season in mid-April, the Communists again withdrew from the Long Tieng area but this time

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(1) LS-161 area of Laos. (2) Gen. Vang Pao, commander of Meo forces. (3) An American C-46 lands at a Laotian base. © N.G.S. (4) The Command Post Center at Vientiane, Laos, coordinated air operations against Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese forces. (5) T-28 aircraft at Vientiane, Laos, 1970.

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no further than a day's march.

In August, after recovering from this latest siege, the government undertook a new offensive, but it was poorly coordinated and ran into stiff enemy resistance. By November 1972 the Communists were a scant 16 miles from Long Tieng, the best position they had ever had prior to launching their annual dry season offensive. To ease the threat, the Air Force launched a heavy B-52 and F-111 air attack against enemy troop and artillery positions, which also came under fire from other USAF aircraft. This intensive air campaign completely overwhelmed the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao, who broke off the siege.

Meanwhile, peace talks between the contending Lao factions had gotten under way. On 10 November 1972 Premier Souvanna Phouma received the ranking member of the Pathet Lao delegation, Phoumi Vongvichit, in Vientiane. Anticipating an in-place ceasefire in the near future, the Communist forces undertook to eliminate the last government enclaves in the northern portions of the Plain of Jars, rather than try another offensive against Long Tieng. By year's end, some of these posts had managed to hold out with the help of aerial resupply and tactical strikes.

On 21 February 1973, less than a month after North Vietnam and the United States signed a ceasefire agreement, the Laotians followed suit. U.S. bombing operations were promptly halted, only to be renewed on 23 February at the request of the Vientiane government after Communist ceasefire violations. On that date, the B-52's launched a heavy attack against enemy positions near Paksong on the Bolovens Plateau. A second enemy ceasefire infringement brought the Stratofortresses back in April with a final strike south of the Plain of Jars. When the dust settled, some 9 years of USAF operations over Laos came to an end.

Chapter VII

Air War in Cambodia

One of the issues that troubled American military leaders was the Presidential prohibition against allied operations into North Vietnamese and Viet Cong sanctuaries in Cambodia and Laos. As early as January 1964, General Taylor, then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, noted to Secretary McNamara that the war was being fought entirely on Communist terms. The enemy, he said

> . . .has determined the locale, the timing and the tactics of the battle while our own actions are essentially reactive. One reason for this is the fact that we have obliged ourselves to labor under self-imposed restrictions with respect to impending external aid to the Viet Cong. These restrictions include keeping the war within the boundaries of South Vietnam.

But in January 1965 President Johnson hoped to avoid a major expansion of the war. However, aware that a serious problem existed, he approved a series of small, covert cross-border military operations. Initiated on 1 February, they involved small-scale American and Vietnamese hit-and-run raids against enemy lines of communication in southern North Vietnam and the Laotian panhandle. These initial cross-border operations proved so successful that Secretary McNamara on 16 March recommended their continuance on a larger scale. He reiterated, however, that the existing "in-country" war strategy was "generally sound and adequate." But there were contrary views. For example, the Director of Central Intelligence, John A. McCone, argued that the allied program would never be completely satisfactory "so long as it permits the Viet Cong a sanctuary in Cambodia and Laos and a continuing uninterrupted and unmolested source of support and reinforcement from North Vietnam through Laos."

Capt. Laird Johnson, 8th Tactical Fighter Wing, checks his F-4 ordnance prior to flying the unit's last combat mission in Southeast Asia.

Periodically, the Joint Chiefs of Staff would suggest specific measures to take the initiative from the enemy. Thus, in August 1964 they proposed breaking up Viet Cong sanctuaries in the Cambodia-South Vietnam border area "through the conduct of 'hot pursuit' operations. . .as required." The President rejected the recommendation at that time and again in 1965 and 1966. In early 1966 Premier Ky pressed U.S. officials for action against the Cambodian sanctuaries. The administration, however, continued to forbid such operations except for self-defense in emergency situations, such as "shooting across the border." In September 1966 General Westmoreland became increasingly concerned about the threat of large enemy forces in Laos, Cambodia, and North Vietnam. His staff studied possible courses of action to counter them, but there was no change in the President's policy prohibiting border crossings.

In March 1967 South Vietnam's leaders met with President Johnson on Guam and again expressed their frustration over the enemy sanctuaries. The President replied that he was just as concerned as they were but did not pursue the issue further. Five months later, Admiral Sharp raised the subject while appearing before a Senate Special Investigating Subcommittee examining restrictions imposed on the air war against North Vietnam. Sharp complained that the allies were limited to essentially "defense" actions, but the enemy attacked "from sanctuaries across the DMZ, from Laos, and from Cambodia, and moves his forces at will across these borders." Political restraints, the admiral noted, had ruled out ground operations to deprive the enemy of those sanctuaries.

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(1) Allied forces seized enemy rice supplies. (2) A cache of enemy rifles and other weapons in Cambodia. (3) An Air-Force F-4 of the 366th Tactical Fighter Wing, Da Nang AB, sweeps through smoke of a previous strike to lay its ordnance on an enemy bunker complex in the Fish Hook area of Cambodia.

Some 4 months later a prestigious voice was heard on the subject. From his retirement home at Gettysburg, Pa., former President Eisenhower on 24 November 1967 publicly advocated "hot pursuit, even in the air," into Cambodia and Laos "to remove a thorn in our sides." Apparently as a direct result of Eisenhower's remarks —endorsed by Gen. Omar N. Bradley, a former chairman of the JCS—the Department of State on 4 December dispatched a diplomatic note to Cambodia complaining about the use of its territory by the Communists. "The root cause of incidents affecting Cambodia territory," the department said, "is the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese presence in the frontier region and their use of Cambodian territory in violation of the neutrality of Cambodia."

Cambodia's leader, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, on 24 December officially denied that "foreign armed forces" were implanted on Cambodian soil. However, in an interview appearing in the *Washington Post* on 29 December, Sihanouk conceded that "small units" of Communist forces had entered Cambodia "under pressure from American forces." He went on to suggest that "if limited combat breaks out between American and Vietnam [Communist] forces" in uninhabited areas of Cambodia, "it goes without saying that we would not interfere militarily." The Cambodian chief suggested that President Johnson send an emissary, preferably Sen. Mike Mansfield, to Phnom Penh to discuss possible U.S. military actions against Communist forces inside his country.

On 1 January 1968, responding to a press conference query, President Johnson said that he had read the account "with a great deal of interest —and I might say pleasure," and that Sihanouk's remarks were being studied. Three days later the White House announced the U.S. ambassador to India, Chester A. Bowles, would soon meet with Sihanouk. Secretary of State Dean Rusk, asked whether Sihanouk's message indicated the door was open for "hot pursuit into his territory," responded that it was a "hypothetical question." He said that if the Cambodian government could assure its own neutrality and territorial integrity with the aid of the International Control Commission, then the question would not arise.

On 8 January the first of several meetings between Ambassador Bowles and Prince Sihanouk took place in Phnom Penh. The envoy also met with the Cambodian prime minister and other government officials. During subsequent discussions with Sihanouk, the ambassador assured him that the United States had no desire to conduct military operations inside his country. Sihanouk accepted these assurances and later told Bowles that "he would not object to the United States engaging in 'hot pursuit' in unpopulated areas of Cambodia." He added that he could not say this publicly or officially.

What President Johnson thought of Bowles' report and what operations he planned to authorize is not known. Whatever these plans, they were aborted at the end of January when Communist forces—operating out of Cambodia, Laos, and North Vietnam—launched their famous Tet offensive throughout South Vietnam. In the early weeks of fighting, NVA and Viet Cong troops temporarily occupied dozens of South Vietnamese cities and towns, including portions of the ancient capital of Hue. As noted in Chapter II, the 1968 Tet offensive killed and injured thousands of people and wreaked enormous physical damage in South Vietnam. Among its victims, politically, was President Johnson. On 31 March he announced that he would not seek re-election and invited Hanoi to negotiate a settlement of the war. As an inducement, he ordered a halt to

bombing of most of North Vietnam. In May 1968 the negotiations got under way in Paris, but quickly bogged down. On 31 October, in a final effort to obtain a settlement before he left office, Mr. Johnson ordered a total ban on air, naval, and artillery bombardment of North Vietnam. But he also warned Hanoi that the end of U.S. operations above the DMZ "must not risk the lives of our men and that the United States would react in such a situation."

President Nixon Orders the Bombing of Cambodia

The North Vietnamese claimed credit for the "overthrow" of the Johnson administration by the U.S. electorate. They also apparently decided to keep up the pressure on the new President, Richard M. Nixon. Thus, the new chief executive had scarcely assumed office in January 1969 when the enemy launched another, if smaller, nationwide offensive on 23 February, shelling Saigon, scores of other cities and towns, and numerous military bases. Not surprisingly, the President concluded that North Vietnam had no intention of going along with the understanding which ended the bombing of North Vietnam. He had before him at this time an 11 February 1969 request from General Abrams, Westmoreland's successor as MACV commander, for authority to bomb enemy bases in Cambodia using B-52's. Whereupon, Mr. Nixon authorized the use of the big bombers against the enemy's rear bases in Cambodia and directed that the bombing be kept secret.

Thus, on 18 March 1969—operating under cover of special security and reporting procedures—the B-52 campaign was launched against NVA/Viet Cong sanctuaries inside Cambodia. To insure secrecy—required to protect Prince Sihanouk's position (in July 1969 he agreed to restore diplomatic relations with the United States, broken off since 1965)—the Defense Department announced these B-52 strikes as being against targets in South Vietnam. The sorties, all of which were flown at night, were directed by ground control radar units. During pre-mission briefings, pilots and navigators of the aircraft were told to react to all directions for bomb release from the ground control personnel. In all, between 18 March 1969 and 26 May 1970, the B-52's flew 4,308 sorties and dropped 120,578 tons of munitions on enemy base camps and headquarters in Cambodia.

Four months after the bombing began, the Cambodian parliament in August 1969 elected a new government headed by Lt. Gen. Lon Nol, the Army Chief of Staff. During the next several months, he and Prince Sihanouk tried unsuccessfully to secure international assistance in removing the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops from Cambodian soil. In March 1970, while Prince Sihanouk was visiting Europe, the Cambodian government boldly demanded withdrawal of all North Vietnamese. Shortly after, on the 18th, Lon Nol announced the overthrow of Prince Sihanouk and the establishment of the Khmer Republic. Sihanouk subsequently formed a government-in-exile in Peking. The Lon Nol government soon found itself threatened by an estimated 40,000 North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops and appealed for arms assistance. By 20 April 1970 enemy forces had taken control of large areas of the country and had cut roads within 15 miles of Phnom Penh. This apparent threat triggered an American/South Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia to root out and destroy the NVA/Viet Cong forces. From the U.S. viewpoint, the operation was long overdue and essential to safeguard the withdrawal of the bulk of American forces from South Vietnam under President Nixon's Vietnamization policy.

The operation began on 24 April when USAF and VNAF tactical aircraft launched strikes against enemy targets in Cambodia. On 29 April and 1 May, 48,000 South Vietnamese and 42,000 American troops drove across the border. Initially, the tactical air strikes, like the operations of the ground troops they were supporting, were limited to areas within 18 miles of the South Vietnamese-Cambodian border. On 14 May, however, a special tactical air strike was launched against a major truck park and storage area in Cambodia beyond the 18-mile zone, along the Xe Kong river near the Laotian border. In addition to the numerous tactical sorties, there were hundreds of B-52 strikes against the enemy.

By 29 June all American and most South Vietnamese troops had withdrawn from Cambodia. In just 60 days the allied ground forces had penetrated up to 20 miles beyond the border and overrun an area totally dominated by the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong. During the operation, the allies killed more than 11,300 troops and captured 2,300 prisoners. They also captured 22,892 individual weapons; more than 15 million rounds of ammunition; 143,000 rockets, mortars, and recoilless rifle rounds; over 199,000 antiaircraft rounds; 5,500 mines, 62,000 grenades, and 83,000 pounds of explosives. They also seized more than 430 vehicles and destroyed 11,600 bunkers and other military structures.

On 30 June 1970, the day after the allied withdrawal, Air Force tactical aircraft began flying air strikes against enemy forces west of the Mekong River, which were menacing the town of Kompong Thom. When attempts by Lon Nol's troops to advance overland to the town failed despite air support, USAF crews turned their attention to roads leading from enemy-occupied Laos toward Kompong Thom. This interdiction attempt failed, however, because the flat terrain permitted the enemy to bypass cratered segments of the highway. Aerial efforts to defend Kompong Thom finally bore fruit when 182 fighter-bomber and 37 gunship strikes between 31 July and 9 August 1970 forced the enemy to fall back. Similar aerial support—60 tactical and 15 gunship sorties—enabled Lon Nol's troops to recapture Skoun, an important highway junction west of the Mekong.

To improve communications between air and ground forces in Cambodia, the Air Force initially assigned an airborne radio relay station (a modified transport) to the combat zone. Later, an elaborately equipped airborne battlefield command and control center was positioned over Cambodia to direct close air support strikes. Problems of language, however, interfered with operations. Some Cambodian officers understood English, but few Americans could speak the local languages. Since the nearest thing to a common tongue was French, a carryover from colonial days, the Air Force used French-speaking volunteers to fly with FAC's and serve as interpreters. The Cambodians also made an effort to find and assign English-speaking officers as forward air guides with infantry units, thereby permitting direct communication between Cambodian ground commanders and Air Force forward air controllers.

By early November 1970 Communist forces had seized perhaps one-half of Cambodia's territory, including several uninhabited regions, despite the tremendous air support provided the Cambodian Army. When the latter proved unable to keep the highway open between the capital and Kompong Som, the nation's major seaport, allied attention turned to the use of river transport to deliver supplies to Phnom Penh. Delivery of supplies via the Mekong River from Vietnam to Cambodia became essential because

of costs and the limited capacity of airlift. Whereupon, Communist forces began interdicting river traffic along a stretch of the Mekong, about 70 miles in length, where it cuts through an area of open flatlands. By January 1971 the enemy had achieved sufficient control of the region to strike almost at will against river traffic, firing from ambush with rocket launchers and recoilless rifles. To ensure the capital's survival, the allies instituted a convoy system, with as many as 46 ships and small craft of the South Vietnamese Navy escorting 10 or more merchantmen and tankers at a time.

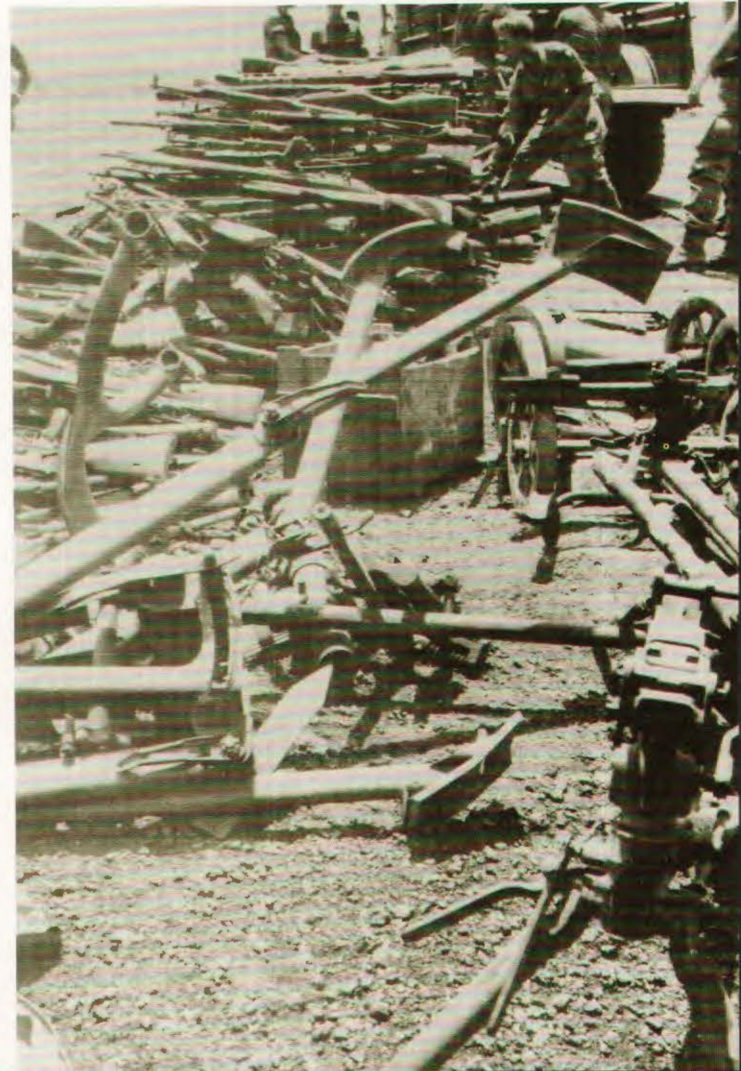
USAF planes and Army helicopters assisted Cambodian and South Vietnamese airmen in providing air cover for the convoys. Later, U.S. Navy planes and helicopters also escorted the convoys. Because so many villages dotted the Mekong's banks, a forward air controller had to be present during such air escort operations. During an ambush, the FAC solicited strike clearance from officers familiar with the area so as not to endanger noncombatants. Only after the FAC received strike authorization could the aerial escorts expend their munitions. Similarly, when friendly troops were involved in clearing operations along river banks, tight control over allied aircraft strikes was necessary.

During the summer of 1971 U.S. air units supported Cambodian operations to reopen the Phnom Penh-Kompong Som highway and the road to Kompong Thom. The latter drive occurred in September and was judged a success. The most important USAF action was taken against an enemy force deployed in a rubber plantation near Chamkar Andong. The aerial attack forced the enemy to abandon his entrenchments there. A napalm strike upon the village of Kompong Thmar routed the defenders and destroyed their munitions stockpile. On the other hand, the enemy got close enough to Phnom Penh to bombard the airport with artillery shells and rockets, causing extensive damage to Cambodian Air Force planes. Communist rockets also hit an oil depot near the capital in September, destroying about 40 percent of Cambodia's fuel storage capacity and millions of gallons of petroleum. The United States replaced the loss with increased POL shipments.

During 1971 the Lon Nol government continued to require the military assistance of South Vietnam and U.S. air power. On several occasions, Saigon forces ventured across the border to attack NVA bases and supply dumps. During one such operation in June, the NVA badly mauled an ARVN task force which fell back in confusion. Because of poor flying weather, the troops initially lacked air support. As the skies cleared, hundreds of sorties were launched against the North Vietnamese. In September and October, ARVN troops were more successful. After stopping an enemy attack upon their positions along the Cambodian border, ARVN troops on 20 September went over to the offensive and reopened the highway between Tay Ninh, South Vietnam, and Krek, Cambodia. While the Vietnamese did the fighting, 1,500 U.S. troops moved behind them in a supporting position inside South Vietnam. Enemy targets in the Tay Ninh-Krek area took a battering from the air, with B-52's dropping 1,000 tons of bombs on the first day of the operation. As the sweep was ending, however, an American fighter-bomber accidentally attacked a South Vietnamese unit, killing 18 and wounding 7.

In Peking, where he was living in exile, Prince Sihanouk claimed that Lon Nol clung to power "only through the intervention of the U.S. Air Force." While somewhat exaggerated, the fact was that air power had influenced those battles in which trained and motivated Cambodian troops had

Among the Soviet and Chinese manufactured weapons seized during the allied incursion into Cambodia were 22,800 individual weapons, more than 15 million rounds of ammunition, and 143,000 rockets, mortars and recoilless rifle rounds.



proved successful. On the other hand, allied air power could not save ill-trained, poorly led units from defeat. As the Cambodians suffered repeated setbacks, their reliance on South Vietnamese ground forces increased. Early in 1972, ARVN troops were withdrawn in anticipation of an enemy attack on the South Vietnamese capital. When it failed to materialize, the troops were sent back to Cambodia where they launched several operations into enemy-held territory.

One of these ARVN incursions in March 1972 proved especially successful. The South Vietnamese, supported by B-52 strikes, seized enough rice from the enemy to feed 10,000 men for 3 months. Also, one B-52 raid caused spectacular damage; the advancing infantry found the bombs had made a direct hit, shattering bunkers of reinforced concrete, killing the occupants, and destroying supplies stored inside. Nevertheless, the enemy still remained in control of large portions of Cambodia east of the Mekong, but still proved incapable of capturing the capital and ousting Lon Nol. U.S. aircrews continued to fly missions against them, even after the ceasefire in South Vietnam became effective in January 1973.

By this time a major portion of the enemy forces threatening the capital were local insurgents of the Khmer Rouge. When they launched an assault on Phnom Penh early in 1973, Cambodia's government quickly requested American help and a massive bombardment got under way. By May an armada of USAF aircraft—including B-52's, F-111's, A-7's, and AC-130's—were launching repeated strikes against enemy targets on the outskirts of the capital. At times, crowds gathered on the west bank of the Mekong to watch them hit Khmer Rouge forces on the opposite shore. Eighty percent of these strikes were against local insurgents and apparently thwarted their plan to capture the capital in the summer of 1973. At one point, when it appeared the enemy might block river traffic again, the Air Force launched

(1) Cambodian troops were trained by the South Vietnamese at the Lam Son Training Center. (2) U.S. Army engineers examine supply crates left behind by fleeing enemy troops. (3) In March 1970, the Cambodian Defense Minister Lt. Gen. Lon Nol, seized control of the government and announced the overthrow of Prince Sihanouk, then visiting in Europe. (4) Lon Nol visited Cambodian troops in September 1970.

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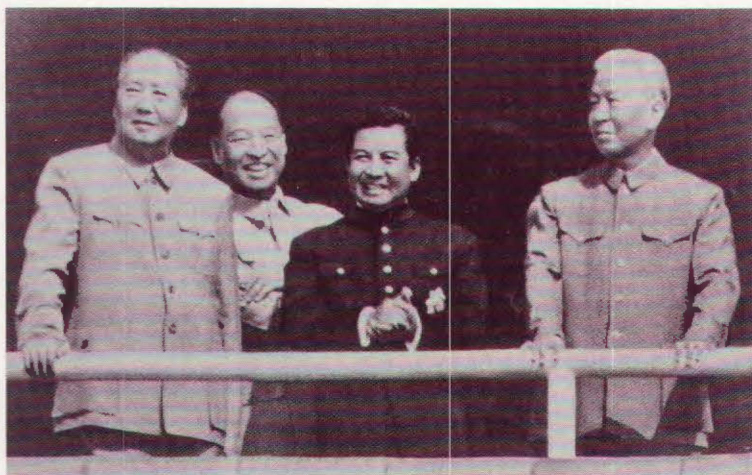

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(1) Cambodian troops trained in Vietnam prepare to board U.S. Air Force C-123K at Nha Trang for the flight back to Cambodia. (2) Sihanouk visited Communist China in October 1965. Shown (l. to r.): Chairman Mao Tse-Tung, Peng Chen, Sihanouk, and China's Chief of State, Liu Shao-chi. (3) Prince Sihanouk met with North Vietnamese Premier Pham Van Dong in Peking in November 1971.

an emergency C-130 airlift from U-Tapao to Phnom Penh's airport. It delivered munitions, rice, military equipment, and occasionally POL. This C-130 resupply effort was temporarily halted, however, when the river convoys succeeded in forcing their way to the capital with the help of aerial escort.

Congressional Criticism

The continuing bombing of Cambodia in the spring and summer of 1973 stirred renewed Congressional criticism at home of the war. Members of the House of Representatives tacked on amendments to several administration bills prohibiting the use of appropriated funds for bombing Cambodian targets. On 27 June the President vetoed one such bill and the House sustained the veto. Later, President Nixon informed Congress that he would not oppose legislation calling for a halt in the bombing within 45 days (on 15 August 1973) instead of requiring an immediate bombing halt. Congress accepted this compromise and on 1 July passed Public Law 93-52 cutting off all funds "to finance directly or indirectly combat activities by United States military forces in or over or from off the shores of South Vietnam, Laos or Cambodia." Mr. Nixon signed the bill into law on 1 July.

As the deadline drew near, the Air Force became involved in two tragic accidents. On 6 August a B-52 mistakenly dropped 20 tons of bombs on the friendly town of Neak Luong, 38 miles southeast of Phnom Penh. The raid killed or wounded more than 400 people. Two days later, American bombs hit a village on an island in the Mekong, just 3 miles from Neak Luong, causing at least 16 casualties. The last U.S. air strike in Cambodia occurred on the morning of 15 August 1973, when an A-7 Corsair, piloted by Capt. Lonnie O. Ratley, returned to its home base in Thailand, marking an end to the nation's longest war. USAF C-130's, however, continued to deliver needed supplies to the Cambodians after that date.