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NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE US AIR FORCE™

Laos: Plain of Jars

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Thailand-based U.S. Air Force aircraft used to train Thai, Laotian and CIA pilots.
(U.S. Air Force photo).



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Damage caused by a communist ground attack on Luang Prabang airfield, Laos, 1967.
(U.S. Air Force photo).



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Unmarked T-28 attach aircraft. (U.S. Air Force photo).



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Often forced to operate from short, crude and isolated landing strips known as Lima Sites, Air America relied on helicopters and rugged light aircraft like this Pilatus PC-6 Porter. (U.S. Air Force photo).

THE SECRET WAR

In response to a Laotian request for assistance, the U.S. initiated covert operations to keep "neutral" Laos from falling to the communist offensive across the Plain of Jars. The U.S. ambassador in Laos assumed control of all US operations in northern Laos, including the CIA-operated Air America fleet, and approved all targets struck by U.S. forces. BARREL ROLL was the code name for this area of operations.

WATER PUMP

In 1964 the USAF began providing aircraft and flight instruction to the Royal Laotian Air Force (RLAF). Under the name WATER PUMP, USAF Air Commandos in Thailand trained RLAF, Thai and civilian Air America pilots to fly armed T-28 trainers and C-47 cargo aircraft in support of Laotian ground forces. WATER PUMP later expanded to include forward air control, armed reconnaissance and close air support strikes by USAF Air Commandos flying from Udorn Air Base in Thailand.

OPERATION BARREL ROLL

In the spring of 1964 Pathet Lao (Laotian communists) and North Vietnamese troops

drove Laotian forces from the Plain of Jars in northern Laos. At first, the USAF only flew unarmed reconnaissance missions. As the situation grew worse, the USAF began flying combat strike missions in northern Laos in under the code name BARREL ROLL. Strike aircraft used during BARREL ROLL included F-100s, F-105s and F-4s based in Thailand and South Vietnam (no USAF jet combat aircraft were stationed in "neutral" Laos).

When the dry season in the fall of 1965 made offensive ground operations on the Plain of Jars possible, the communists launched their largest offensive to date. Air power gradually slowed the Pathet Lao advance, and by August 1966, a Royal Laotian counterattack had advanced to within 45 miles of the North Vietnamese border. North Vietnam responded by sending in more troops, and once again the Laotians retreated. This remained the pattern for the next two years, with the ground situation changing back and forth with the seasons. The USAF flew thousands of BARREL ROLL missions, but poor weather at times caused missions to be cancelled.

In 1970 fresh North Vietnamese troops advanced through northern Laos. In February USAF B-52s bombed targets in northern Laos for the first time. Laotian reinforcements, along with the AC-47 gunships the USAF had provided to the Royal Laotian Air Force, stopped the enemy. For the rest of the year, it remained a "seesaw" military campaign. Through 1972, the communists slowly occupied more territory in northern Laos with their superior numbers, but they failed to overwhelm government forces.

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