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CORONA HARVEST
WATERPUMP, 1964-1965 (U)
A SPECIAL REPORT

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Project CORONA HARVEST
(January 1970)

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FOREWORD

General. This CORONA HARVEST special report is one of a continuing series of short, informative papers on highly significant airpower or airpower-associated subjects related to the war in Southeast Asia. Distribution of special reports is limited and controlled, with specific recipients determined separately for each report.

Purpose. (S) To present an objective account of the United States Air Force role in countering the Pathet Lao offensive against the Kingdom of Laos in 1964 and in developing an indigenous T-28 strike capability.

Scope. (S) In early 1964 a Special Air Warfare (SAW) detachment deployed TDY to Udorn, Thailand to train Royal Lao Air Force pilots in the T-28. This detachment, known as WATERPUMP, subsequently played a critical role in blunting a major Pathet Lao thrust which began in May 1964.

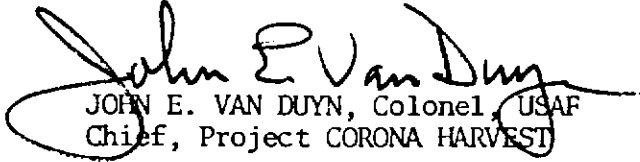
(S) As of January 1970 the WATERPUMP program at Udorn had expanded to encompass Royal Lao Air Force pre-flight, primary, basic and advanced flying training in the T-28, producing a combat-ready pilot from non-flying trainees after five and one-half months and 200 flying hours of training. WATERPUMP, which in 1964 was the only SAW force in northeastern Thailand, is now part of a Special Operations Force (SOF) numbering more than 50 aircraft and 1000 personnel. In addition to the critical assistance it provides the Royal Lao Air Force, WATERPUMP is continuing its highly successful medical civic action program begun in 1964.

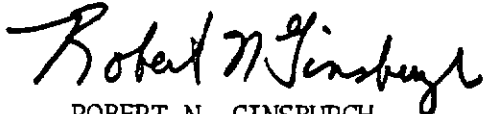
(S) This paper reviews the events, political and military, leading to the United States decision to increase military assistance to the Kingdom of Laos in 1964. In addition it studies WATERPUMP activities through 1964, special training operations added to WATERPUMP in 1964 and 1965, and the role of the T-28 in combat operations during 1964 and 1965 to determine the degree to which these activities contributed to the achievement of US objectives.

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LAOS: BACKGROUND

(U) The kingdoms of Luang Prabang and Vientiane emerged from direct French colonial rule in July 1949 as the unified Kingdom of Laos, a quasi-independent state within the French Union. Non-communist nationalist opposition to remaining French control in Laos became associated with several aristocratic Lao families struggling for leadership of the country. Communist opposition to the remnants of French colonial rule took the form of the Pathet Lao (PL), a guerrilla force led by Prince Souphanouvong which sought to emulate the Viet Minh. In April 1953 the Viet Minh broadened their campaign against the French by invading Laos and linking up with the PL.[1]

(U) US policy toward Indochina through 1961 was based on the "domino" theory, on the idea of a single unified communist threat to Asia, and on a recognition of the particular strategic importance of Laos within Southeast Asia.[2] Laos split the Southeast Asian peninsula in half, flanking Thailand and Vietnam, and sharing a total of 4,000 miles of border with six countries (Burma, Cambodia, Communist China, North Vietnam, South Vietnam, and Thailand). The aim of US policy until 1961 was to support development of an independent, non-communist and pro-Western Laos.

(U) The US recognized Laos as an independent state within the French Union in February 1950. To support the resistance to the Viet Minh, the US signed a Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement with France, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam in December 1950. Under this agreement the US increased the indirect military aid it was already providing the Associated States of Indochina through France. The agreement expressly precluded direct relations between the US Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG), which had been established in August 1950, and the Associated States. Increasing US aid to support French prosecution of the Indochina war culminated in September 1953 when the US agreed to underwrite the cost of the ill-starred Navarre Plan, especially in regard to training, equipping and maintaining local forces. Under this plan the French Commander, General Henri Navarre, expected to reduce the organized body of Viet Minh resistance by the end of 1955 and thereafter to rely on local forces to suppress any residual guerrilla action.

(U) The Geneva Agreement of 1954 on Laos directed the removal of French and Viet Minh forces from Laos. The PL withdrew to the northern provinces of Phong Saly and Sam Neua,

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which were to be administered jointly by the Royal Lao Government and the PL pending a political settlement between the two groups. The agreement barred reinforcement of Royal Lao Government and PL forces with troops from outside Laos, prohibited Laos from entering military alliances, and disallowed establishment of foreign bases on Laotian soil. A specified number of French military personnel were allowed to remain in Laos to train the Forces Armees Royales (FAR). An International Control Commission, composed of Canadian, Indian and Polish delegates, supervised the provisions of the agreement.

(U) During the years following the Geneva Agreement, the Neutralist government of Souvanna Phouma pursued a policy designed to integrate PL territory into the now fully independent Kingdom of Laos and PL military forces into the FAR. Agreements reached with the PL in August 1956 and November 1957 seemingly achieved the ends of Souvanna's policy. In light of this apparent fulfillment of the Geneva Agreement, the Royal Lao Government requested in July 1958 that the International Control Commission disband.

(S) After conclusion of the Geneva Agreement, the US provided direct assistance to the Associated States. US aid to Laos between 1955 and 1960 averaged about \$40,000,000 a year.[3] Over ninety percent of this aid was earmarked for development and maintenance of the FAR, the entire budget of which the US financed. In addition, only two months after agreement had been reached at Geneva, a protocol was added to the SEATO Treaty extending its provisions for action against aggression and for economic and technical assistance to Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. At the end of 1955 the US activated a Programs Evaluation Office (PEO) at Vientiane, Laos.[4] The PEO, a civilian organization attached to the US Overseas Mission and integrated into the International Cooperation Administration, performed many of the functions normally assigned to a Military Assistance Group. The Geneva Agreement and a US State Department/Department of Defense agreement, however, precluded its identification as such and the inclusion of uniformed military personnel on its staff.

The End of Geneva

(U) On 22 July 1958 Souvanna Phouma resigned, marking the beginning of a period of increasing Rightist control of the Royal Lao Government. Rightist policy opposed the idea of a neutral Laos governed in part by the PL and favored a pro-Western, anti-communist Laos. To further this policy the Lao National Assembly authorized Premier Phoui Sananikone to conduct a program of social, economic and political reform without consulting the Assembly. The primary objective of this program was to limit PL activity and

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influence. Shortly thereafter the Royal Lao Government renounced the Geneva Agreement, presumably to develop closer ties to SEATO and to increase US military aid.[5]

(U) The PL responded to the Phoui policy by reverting to open military activity. In August 1959 the Royal Lao Government declared a state of emergency in five provinces and requested a UN observer team to investigate its contention that the PL were receiving external aid. As a result of the increased PL activity and of dissension within his own cabinet, Phoui resigned under pressure in December 1959. Rightist elements of the FAR assumed direction of the nation. A cabinet led by Tiao Somsanith was appointed to govern until elections were held. In April 1960 the pro-government party won 95 percent of the seats in the Assembly in an election subject to government control.

The Crisis of 1960-1962

(U) On 9 August 1960 Captain Kong Le, leader of Neutralist elements within the FAR, staged a coup in Vientiane in support of a Neutralist government to be headed by Souvanna Phouma. The Kong Le coup set off a vortex of military actions and political negotiations which threatened to draw the Great Powers more deeply into Lao affairs than any of them wished to go. Despite US and French insistence that they would not support him, General Phoumi Nosavan, Minister of Defense in the Somsanith cabinet, formed a revolutionary committee headed by himself and Rightist Prince Boun Oum. The objective of the committee was to retake Vientiane and wrest control of the government of Laos from Souvanna Phouma who had formed a cabinet at the request of King Savang Vatthana and therefore represented the legitimate government of the country. In late September the Soviet Ambassador to Laos announced that the USSR would begin to airlift foodstuffs and other supplies to the forces of Kong Le and the PL.[6] During the period of negotiation that ensued, the US supplied both the government and the committee, and pressed for agreement between the two.[7] By 16 December 1960, however, Phoumi controlled Vientiane, Souvanna Phouma had fled to Cambodia, Kong Le had withdrawn his Neutralist army northeastward to Xiangkhoang, and the King had appointed Boun Oum head of a provisional government.[8]

(S) The Boun Oum government, installed in January as the legitimate government of Laos, was one to which the US chose to give open support. On 16 December 1960 President Eisenhower authorized the use of transport aircraft to support the FAR at Vientiane. The next day an air crew from the Air Attache's office (AIRA) resumed reconnaissance flights which had been suspended in mid-August.[9] Reconnaissance by a variety of aircraft, which continued intermittently until July 1962, produced photographic evidence of Soviet airdrop of weapons and ammunition

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to the armies of Kong Le and the PL.[10] On 22 December 1960 the US issued a statement of its serious concern over continuing Soviet airlift of military supplies to the rebels. Nine days later PACAF was placed on alert, a status in which it remained until May 1961.[11]

(S) In the spring of 1961 the US placed troops in Thailand in order to bring pressure for negotiations. During March, as a part of "Millpond," PACAF sent personnel TDY to JUSMAG Thailand and PEO/MAAG Laos. At the same time President Kennedy authorized a number of actions designed to improve the quality of FAR leadership, personnel and equipment.[12] In April the 300 officers and enlisted men attached to PEO were directed to don their uniforms and function openly as a MAAG, working with the FAR Command and forming mobile teams to provide tactical advice to units in the field. Concurrently control reporting facilities were established and a unit of F-102s (BELLTONE) deployed to Don Muang, RTAFB, Thailand.[13] The immediate objective of US policy was attained when a ceasefire was agreed on and the fourteen nation conference on Laos opened in Geneva on 12 May 1961.

(U) Three sets of negotiations went on under the auspices of the Geneva conference. The conference proper dealt with the nature and preservation of Lao neutrality. The three Lao princes (Boun Oum, Souphanouvong and Souvanna Phouma) held discussions on forming a tripartite coalition government. Political and military representatives of the three factions negotiated for a permanent ceasefire.(14)

(S) Despite attempts to enforce the existing ceasefire, PL forces continued to advance during the period of negotiation. In early May 1962 the PL routed the FAR in northwest Laos, posing a threat to the Mekong River border of Thailand. In order to bring pressure on the conference to reach agreement, and in response to a request for assistance from the government of Thailand, the US immediately deployed a Joint Task Force to Thailand.[15]

(U) Within a month the Lao princes agreed on a government of national union headed by Souvanna Phouma, Souphanouvong and General Phoumi Nosavan. The coalition included 11 Neutralists (four of whom supported the Boun Oum faction of Rightists on most questions), four Rightists and four PL.[16]

(U) On 23 July 1962 the Geneva Conference issued a Declaration of the Neutrality of Laos which accepted a statement of neutrality made by the Royal Lao Government two weeks earlier, and which further obligated the signatories to refrain from any acts which directly or indirectly infringed on the sovereignty,

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independence, neutrality or territorial integrity of Laos. Specifically, the signatories (including North Vietnam, South Vietnam, Thailand, the US and the USSR) agreed they would not attach political conditions to assistance provided Laos, bring Laos into a military alliance, introduce military personnel into Laos, establish bases in Laos, use Lao territory to interfere in the internal affairs of other nations, or use the territory of any country to interfere in the internal affairs of Laos.

The End of Geneva II

(S) After the Geneva Conference Laos remained undisturbed only long enough for factional rivalries to reassert themselves. By the end of 1962 platoon-size military actions were occurring in the Plaine des Jarres (PDJ) and in the south.[17] The PL began to pressure the Neutralist Army out of jointly held areas by cutting off its supplies. At the request of Souvanna Phouma, the US responded with provisions and equipment for the Neutralists. US policy at this time was to stabilize the government of National Union and to preserve the Neutralist/Rightist working coalition under Souvanna Phouma.[18] In April 1963 the PL reverted to full-scale belligerence, driving the Neutralist Army out of the PDJ area and successfully attacking Rightist positions in south-central Laos.[19]

(U) The failure of the government of national union to resolve the increasing armed conflict, together with Souvanna's announced intention to resign after failure of tripartite talks on the neutralization of Luang Prabang, triggered a coup by a faction of Rightist army officers in April 1964. Within a week Souvanna returned as Premier, supported by the King, General Phoumi Nosavan, General Kong Le, the US and the USSR. On 1 May Souvanna Phouma announced a merger of Rightist and Neutralist forces in Laos. The PL responded with a twin offensive.[20]

(S) As of March 1964 Military Assistance Program (MAP) support of military troops in Laos was based on a force level of 46,500 men. Six thousand five hundred personnel composed the Neutralist Army of Kong Le concentrated in and around the PDJ. The FAR, composed of 40,000 men, was positioned along Route 4 between the Plaine and Paksane.[21] Confronting the Royal Lao Army ground forces were approximately 20,000 PL and an unknown number of Viet Minh.

(S) The Royal Lao Army, unlike the PL, possessed an air capability. The Royal Lao Air Force (RLAF) at the beginning of the 1960-1962 crisis had consisted of 15 aircraft and less

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than 500 personnel. As an integral part of the FAR, the RLAF did not have an air planning staff; nor was it represented in any of the higher echelons of command. Continuing problems had resulted from the nebulous role assigned it by FAR general staff officers having a limited conception of air operations. Assigned aircraft outnumbered the pilots qualified to fly them. Logistics support and maintenance capability were virtually non-existent; most of the maintenance actually performed had been done by Filipino mechanics contracted under the MAP.[22]

(S) During 1961 the US took action through the MAP to increase the effectiveness of the RLAF by adding transport aircraft to meet critical airlift requirements and by introducing armed T-6s to provide air support for ground operations. (The T-6s were replaced by T-28s in August 1963.) USAF training programs were initiated to enable the Laos to operate and maintain the equipment provided them under the MAP.[23]

(S) In April 1964 the RLAF consisted of 76 MAP-funded aircraft. Two-thirds of these, however, were helicopters or utility/observation aircraft. The RLAF's transport capability consisted of 19 C-47s; its close air support and interdiction capability of six T-28s. Fourteen RLAF pilots were T-28 qualified. Up to this point the RLAF had been ineffective, averaging three combat sorties or less per assigned aircraft per month in the preceding six months. Most of these combat missions were armed reconnaissance sorties using machine guns and rockets only. There was no identifiable pattern of planned interdiction operations.[24]

(U) With this limited capability, the Royal Lao Army and the RLAF faced intensified military activity at the end of April 1964. On 28 April the PL attacked the Phousan Ridge northeast of the PDJ. In early May the PL initiated two offensives, one against the Neutralist positions on the Plaine, the other against FAR positions between the Plaine and Paksane. On 14 May the Rightist base at Tha Thom, 90 miles northeast of Vientiane, was overrun. Three days later Kong Le fled his headquarters at Muong Phan on the PDJ. Neutralist troops fell back into Meo country in the mountains and to Muong Soui on Route 7.[25] By 19 May the PL controlled the PDJ and were advancing southward toward Vang Vieng, 60 miles north of Vientiane. On 5 June the PL captured Phou Kout northwest of the Plaine, while Kong Le's forces blocked its efforts to take Muong Soui on the western edge of the PDJ.

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Operation Triangle, was undertaken to support Muong Soui from the west, gain control of the road junction, and defeat the three PL battalions positioned in the junction area. It was the first operation in which government forces engaged in extensive air/ground coordination. [53]

(S) Skepticism as to the success of the proposed operation was widespread since government forces had not yet shown the stamina to conduct an aggressive and sustained land offensive. Moreover, early efforts by the AIRA to interest air and ground commanders in coordinated close air support operations had foundered on the mutual hostilities and suspicions of Lao air and ground commanders. The undeniable effectiveness of the RLAF T-28s in support of ground forces, however, overrode these difficulties and provided the incentive for air/ground coordination. [54]

(S) Generals Kong Le and Vang Pao visited the AOC in Vientiane to arrange details for air support of their forces. As a result of these visits, Kong Le volunteered to furnish ground observers in the rear seats of the T-28s supporting his operations. FAC/air liaison officer (ALO) teams operated with each of the three ground forces involved. The FAC deployed with the leading element of each ground force and communicated with the ALO by UHF radio or courier. The ALO remained with the ground force commander and communicated with the AIRA by low frequency radio. The AIRA in turn communicated with the AOC by telephone. [55]

(S) Severe weather in early July delayed the operation, curtailing T-28 strike and reconnaissance missions, closing Muong Soui to all but light aircraft, and preventing airlift of artillery and the main body of troops from southern Laos. By 15 July, however, airlift of artillery and troops had been completed. As the weather cleared, T-28 operations increased. By 24 July RLAF T-28s had flown a total of more than 340 interdiction missions representing over 1100 sorties since the beginning of the PL offensive in May. Between 20 July and 28 July, the 25 to 30 operationally ready RLAF T-28s flew an average of over 30 sorties per day. (Thai pilots flew approximately three-quarters of these sorties.) On 25 July, as ground operations kicked off, the T-28s doubled their daily sortie average. [56]

(S) The southern prong of Operation Triangle, consisting of over 3000 FAR and Neutralist troops, moved northward along Route 13, occupying Ban Thieng and seizing Muong Kassy at the end of July. From the Muong Soui area, 1500 troops moved westward along Route 7, taking Nam Tiat and advancing to Phou Suong.

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The northwest prong moved against the junction of Routes 7 and 13, blocking PL reinforcement from the northwest and west, closing on Phou Chia on 20 July, and taking the junction on 30 July. [57]

(S) The first strongpoint blocking the advance of Neutralist forces included trenches, field artillery positions and buildings. Fourteen T-28 strikes called in by Kong Le reduced resistance so greatly that, as soon as the strikes were halted, the position was taken with a reported three Neutralist casualties. Similar strike operations supported the other prongs of the offensive. Ground calls for strikes and marking of enemy positions (in one instance Government troops on their own initiative constructed a large white arrow with which they indicated the azimuth of enemy forces, thus effectively marking their position) permitted successful air attacks against PL formations, some of which no longer existed as organized military units. The major ground objectives of Operation Triangle were taken within a week of the beginning of ground operations. The WATERPUMP Commander observed in regard to Operation Triangle: [58]

It was a tremendous effort and in something like two weeks from inception we had gained back a real sizeable chunk of real estate for the first time in the history of Laos operations. And again we were credited, of course, to the T-28 effort being 99% of it.

Panhandle Strikes

(S) In October 1964 the RLAF began air strikes against infiltration facilities on the routes leading from Nape and Mu Gia Passes, such as the Muong Phine military and supply area at the intersection of Routes 9 and 23 and Ban Dong at the juncture of Routes 9 and 92. Within two weeks RLAF T-28s had launched over 100 sorties on 13 targets. Eighty-five percent of these sorties were completed, striking eight of the 13 targets. Bomb damage assessments of four targets showed good to excellent results on three. Forty-six additional sorties struck targets of opportunity such as troop movements. Pilots reported good to excellent effect. In early November General Ma transferred his T-28s from Vientiane (where they had been stationed since May) to Savannakhet, and the RLAF concentrated on support of FAR ground operations. Targets included troop positions, supply and fuel-oil-lubricant storage areas, military installations, bridges, and truck parks as well as close air support for ground forces. [59]

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Support of 1965 Offensives

(S) In July 1965 the FAR launched three widely scattered offensives. In the north Meo troops under General Vang Pao opened a limited offensive near Na Khang in Sam Neua Province. A second limited offensive was begun north of Dong Hene in the central Panhandle. In the southern Panhandle, a third offensive was started southwest of Attopeu.

(S) The initial objective of the Sam Neua offensive was to take Hua Muong, 25 kilometers northwest of Na Khang. The PL set up strong defenses on Phou Keo Fa Mut, a critical hill lying between the two villages. Although 17 PL positions fell between 10 July and 22 July, attempts to take Phou Keo Fa Mut failed. Seventeen T-28 sorties against PL and People's Army of North Vietnam (PAVN) positions in the area also failed to dislodge enemy troops. A PAVN unit which had suffered heavy casualties from air strikes was replaced by two other PAVN units. Between 21 July and 24 July more than 40 sorties were flown against their positions. On the 22d the FAR seized the south slope of Phou Keo Fa Mut, and the next day reached the top, leaving PAVN troops on the north side. On the 24th the RLAF attacked the north side, inflicting heavy losses and forcing most of the remaining troops to flee. As FAR forces slowly closed in on Hua Muong, an all-out T-28 effort was begun. Target areas were subjected to day-long attacks by T-28s before ground forces moved in, exacting a heavy toll from Communist forces despite efforts to reinforce them. In August General Vang Pao praised the air strikes, noting that his troops were outnumbered three to one, and that air support had offset the imbalance and resulted in the success of the offensive. [60]

(S) The Dong Hene offensive was intended to clear PL from an area northeast of Dong Hene. In August the offensive spread northward when another drive began to retake the Nam Theun Valley northeast of Thakhek. Slowed by weather, terrain and enemy resistance, the offensive slowly ground its way to its objectives, aided by T-28 strikes such as that on Ban Khen which emptied the town of enemy troops and left at least 47 PL troops killed. In November, when the operation appeared at an end, Communist troops attacked near Thakhek and threatened to cut the Panhandle in half. RLAF T-28s provided close air support to reinforced FAR forces conducting a counter-offensive. In one area alone, T-28 strikes killed approximately 100 enemy troops. On the basis of efforts such as this, US Ambassador William Sullivan described close air support as the single factor enabling the FAR to regain control of the situation. [61]

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(S) The Attapeu offensive began as a clearing operation along the Se Kong River. Government forces attacked both north and south of the river, supported by six T-28s stationed at Pakse, 100 kilometers to the northwest. PL troops scattered northward onto the Bolevens Plateau and eastward across the river. A PL attempt to push northeast across the Se Kong near Ban Soutouat in October was repulsed and the area remained quiescent. [62]

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EVALUATION

(U) Two broad criteria most pertinently measure the effectiveness of WATERPUMP, both criteria taking into account that WATERPUMP deployed under a US policy of withholding direct US military participation in Southeast Asia as long as possible while making maximum use of indigenous resources. The first criterion is the short-range impact of a small SAW training detachment on RLA operations against the PL offensive of 1964. The second is the long-range effect of WATERPUMP activities on the nature and capability of the RLA, and therefore, on the ability of the Royal Lao Government to maintain the stance prescribed for it by the Geneva Agreement of 1962.

The Short-range Impact.

(S) RLA operations between May and December 1964 concentrated on Route 7 which runs from Xuan Loi, North Vietnam westward to the Barthelemy Pass, through the Plaine des Jarres, and ends at Ban San Xieng La, Laos where it intersects Route 13, the main north/south road from Luang Prabang to Vientiane. The effect of the entry of T-28s into combat in a close air support and interdiction role was immediate. The dispersal of PL troops without significant resistance reflected a reluctance to concentrate forces in the face of possible T-28 attack. Concentrations of PL personnel for large scale attacks became infrequent after daily T-28 operations began. In addition there was an unprecedented increase in the number of PL anti-aircraft gun positions on the Plaine des Jarres between 14 June and 28 June 1964. [63]

(S) Meo ground patrols moving within PL-controlled areas reported that almost all truck traffic moved only during hours of darkness. Any daylight movement was limited to periods of bad weather. Vehicular traffic was dispersed and camouflaged during daylight hours. Coolie labor units, essential to the maintenance of PL logistic support, began to desert the PL in fear of air attack. The Meo also observed PL/Viet Minh troops killed by T-28 air strikes, although they were unable to provide reliable body counts. [64]

(S) Captured PL/Viet Minh troops indicated that communist forces were terrorized by T-28 strikes, and planned operations to use the hours of darkness and bad weather in order to avoid air attack. Bomb shelters and underground storage facilities

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were begun by the PL in stronghold areas such as Khang Khai. PL propaganda incessantly demanded that the T-28 raids be stopped. This shrill insistence reflected the effectiveness of attacks which in one instance caused 350 casualties in one command post, and in another instance destroyed 15 anti-aircraft guns and 45 vehicles and caused 100 casualties. Pilots conducting the strikes reported successful results on every type of target they struck destroying an undetermined number of buildings, trucks, gun positions, troop positions, bridges, storage areas, and staging areas.[65]

(S) The efforts of the RLAF were responsible for most of the successful offensives and counter-offensives of FAR and neutralist forces in 1964. Close air support was repeatedly credited with determining the outcome of engagements and with improving the morale of ground forces. For seven months, from May to December 1964, the RLAF provided the only close air support for the government ground forces and conducted the only interdiction operations against PL/Viet Minh truck traffic. The on-the-spot estimation of Ambassador Unger was that the WATERPUMP T-28s and the WATERPUMP trained pilots had stabilized the situation during an extremely critical period.

T-28s have proved to be a decisive factor in recent military operations. They have carried out air operations to destroy Pathet Lao bases, interdict supply lines, provide close support for ground operations and provide visual and photo recce.

Nothing that has happened subsequently gives cause to modify the Ambassador's evaluation.[66]

(S) Mute but weighty support was given to the Ambassador's estimate by the failure of the PL to mount its usual spring offensive in 1965. The pattern and volume of vehicular traffic over the normal PL supply routes indicated such an offensive was planned. T-28 interdiction raids, however, forestalled the usual pattern of PL operations and gave the RLA a respite.[67]

The Long-Range Impact

(S) The battle of the Plaine des Jarres marked the beginning of increased and effective air support for RLA forces. In 1965 the RLAF flew almost 4500 T-28 sorties. Its sortie rate per aircraft per month was three times the rate it flew only two years earlier. During the rainy season aircraft reconnoitered, struck PL/Viet Minh base supply and bivouac areas, and performed some close air support under FAC control. In the dry season

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emphasis shifted to armed reconnaissance, strikes to disrupt enemy concentrations and forward movement, and close air support for Royal Lao Army positions. By mid-1969 the RLAF consisted of 1500 personnel, of whom 104 were pilots. Forty of the RLAF pilots were T-28 qualified. Seventy-two RLAF aircraft were deployed at four bases. The RLAF had developed into an effective force capable of flying 2000 day-time sorties a month in a variety of aircraft to support tactical operations. The RLAF capability, which consisted largely of observation, transport and armed reconnaissance in 1963, had grown to include effective close air support, planned interdiction operations, and limited night air strike actions. Limitations on the effectiveness of the RLAF remained an inadequate number of trained ground support personnel and a continuing dependence on US logistic support.[68] Indigenous airpower employed at the relatively low force level maintained in Laos could not by itself dominate the conflict, and as the JCS had realized in March 1964, a small group of T-28s by itself could not tip the balance in favor of the Royal Lao Army. Nevertheless, the RLAF strike and interdiction capability developed by WATERPUMP did provide the Royal Lao Army with a vital and continuing advantage over the insurgents.[69]

In both the short- and the long-range view, this small group of dedicated USAF Special Air Warfare experts have contributed in large measure to maintaining the independence and neutrality of Laos. In the words of CINCPAC,

This small group of aircraft and crews performed far beyond expectations and was a significant factor in stabilizing the tactical situation during this period.[70]

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FOOTNOTES

(Material extracted from TOP SECRET sources is not classified above SECRET due to the nature of the particular extractions and to the guidance contained in AFISPPB letter, 26 November 1969, Subject: "Security Classification Related to Military Assistance" (U).)

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