

In 1962, the United States began a “secret war” in Laos. The operation wasn’t revealed until 1970, by which time it consumed half of all US attack sorties in Southeast Asia.

Barrel Roll

By John T. Correll

In early 1961, the hot spot of leading concern in Southeast Asia was not Vietnam but Laos.

The new US President, John F. Kennedy, rated Laos as “the most immediate of the problems that we found upon taking office” in January. On March 23, Kennedy held a news conference, nationally televised, to talk about Laos. He pointed out the communist advance on a large map. The Pathet Lao insurgents, supported by the Russians and the North Vietnamese, had captured the northeastern part of the country.

“Laos is far away from America, but the world is small,” Kennedy said. “The security of all Southeast Asia will be endangered if Laos loses its neutral independence. Its own safety runs with the safety of us all, in real neutrality observed by all.”

In itself, Laos had little strategic importance. It was remote and landlocked, with a population of only two million. However, it shared borders with six other countries and had traditionally served as a buffer zone between the more powerful neighboring states.

The real concern about Laos was that the insurgency would spread and destabilize the rest of the region. “If the communists [are] able to move in and dominate this country, it would endanger the security of all and the peace of all of Southeast Asia,” Kennedy said.

He described the situation as “grave,” but the crisis seemed to taper off peacefully in May 1961 when the warring factions reached a cease-fire. In 1962, a Geneva agreement, signed by 14 nations, established a neutral coalition government and ordered all foreign military personnel out of Laos.

The American assistance and advisory



Thousands of ancient stone jars dot the plains in the center of Laos.

group, about 750 people, left promptly, but no more than 40 of the 7,000 North Vietnamese troops in Laos ever went home. Pathet Lao strength increased after the cease-fire, and the civil war resumed full tilt.

Following the advice of his political staff, Kennedy chose to meet North Vietnam’s violation of the Geneva accord with covert measures rather than open confrontation. The subsequent “secret war” in Laos grew from that decision. Clandestine assistance evolved to direct participation in combat, with American

pilots flying air support for the Laotian ground forces.

In the meantime, the US focus in Southeast Asia shifted to Vietnam. Laos was relegated to a secondary priority, and the objectives in Laos changed. The main goal had become to deny the North Vietnamese use of the Ho Chi Minh Trail in southern Laos as an infiltration route. US airpower staved off defeat for the weak Laotian government. In return, the Laotian government acquiesced in US aerial interdiction of the trail.

The air war in northern Laos was

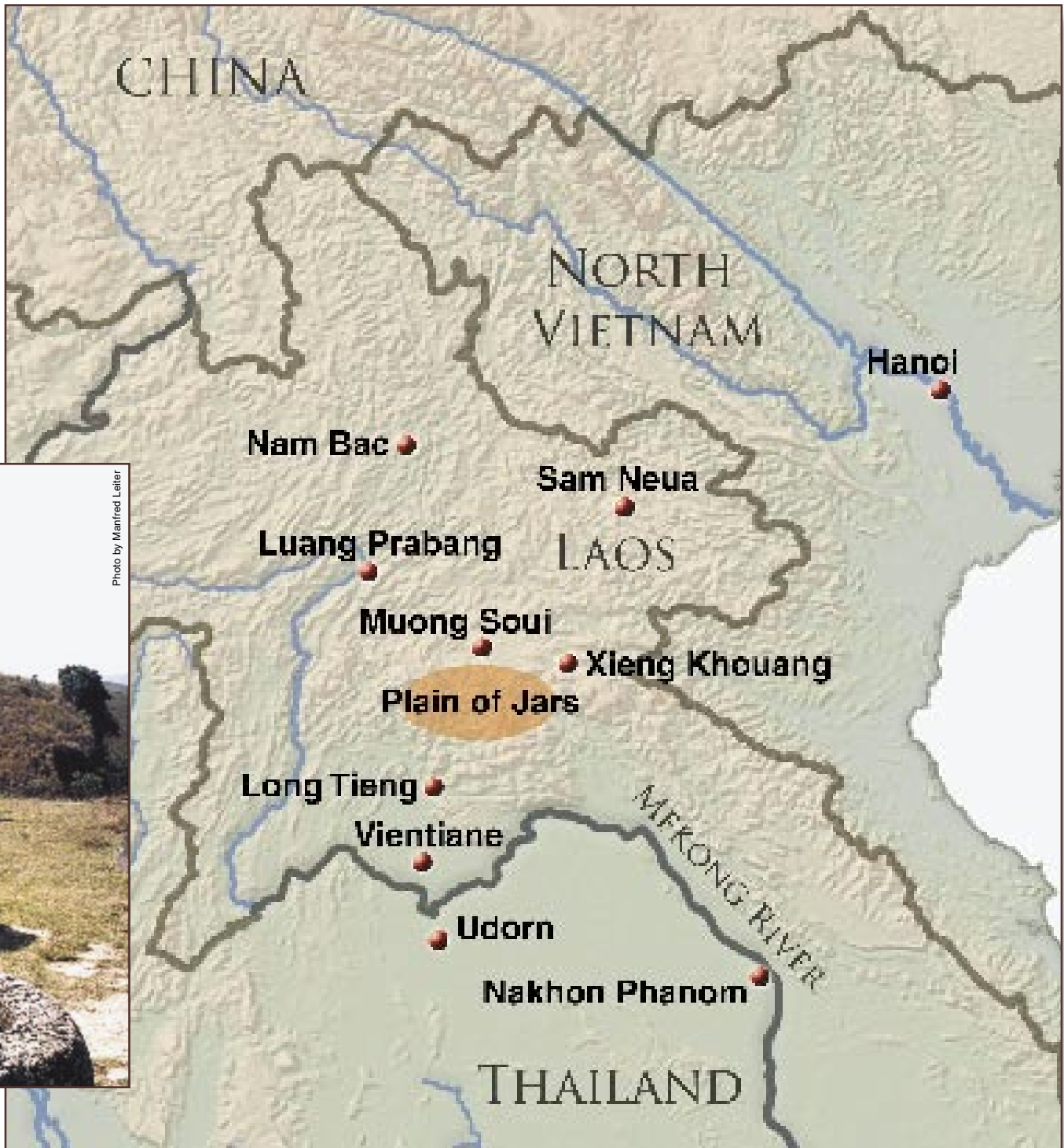


Photo by Manfred Leiter



designated “Barrel Roll.” When the operations there peaked in 1969, US airmen were flying 300 strike sorties a day.

Incredibly, the cloak of official secrecy imposed in 1962 remained in place. There were sporadic reports of it in the newspapers, and Congress knew about it, but the government did not publicly acknowledge that Americans were fighting a war in Laos until 1970.

Barrel Roll differed from the fight-

ing elsewhere in the theater in almost every respect and to such an extent that it effectively amounted to a separate war.

Land of a Million Elephants

Everything about Laos staggered the imagination.

It was a 600-year-old monarchy, known for reasons long since forgotten as the “Land of a Million Elephants.” The king was a figurehead and con-

Above, a map of Laos and neighboring countries shows the capital cities and headquarters of opposing sides of the conflict in Laos—the government, at Vientiane, and the Pathet Lao insurgency, at Sam Neua. Also on the map, the Plain of Jars was the main battleground and strategic crossroads of Laos.



This A-1 Skyraider was stationed at Udorn AB, Thailand. US Ambassador William Sullivan, dubbed “field marshal” for his power struggles with military leaders, believed propeller aircraft were well-suited for the war in Laos.

fined his activities to the royal capital at Luang Prabang. The government ran from the administrative capital at Vientiane.

Each faction in the civil war was headed by a prince of the royal blood. Prince Souvanna Phouma, a neutralist/centrist, was the Prime Minister. His half brother, the “Red Prince” Souphanouvong, was the founder and head of the Pathet Lao.

Northern Laos consisted mainly of mountains. Most of the level terrain was in the Mekong River valley, along the border with Thailand, and around the historic Plaine de Jarres, the PDJ or Plain of Jars, in the middle of the country. Only four percent of the land was arable. The road system was limited and there was no railroad.

The strength of the Pathet Lao was in the east, adjacent to North Vietnam. Their capital was at Sam Neua. The government’s strength was in the west. The main battleground was PDJ, a rolling grassland 500 miles square, where hundreds of huge stone jars from ancient times dotted the landscape. The PDJ was the strategic crossroads of Laos. (See “The Plain of Jars,” June 1999, p. 78.)

Neither the regular Laotian forces nor the Pathet Lao were noted for their fighting qualities. North Vietnamese troops stiffened the spine of the Pathet Lao, and the best forces on the government side were Hmong hill tribesmen, trained and supported by the CIA (whose cover name in Laos was “Controlled American Source”).

The CIA’s proprietary airline, Air America, established a network of about 200 “Lima Sites,” rough airstrips in the mountains where light aircraft could land with supplies and equipment for the guerrilla units. The sites also were used as staging bases for forward operations.

The charismatic leader of the Hmong was Maj. Gen. Vang Pao, a former lieutenant colonel in the Laotian Army who inspired loyalty from both his irregular forces and his American advisors and allies. He relocated his Hmong followers from their homes in the north to mountain strongholds near the PDJ. By

1968, the Hmong infantry had 40,000 soldiers.

Vang Pao’s power base was the military headquarters at Long Tieng, just south of the PDJ, in a valley surrounded on three sides by mountains. CIA and Air Force aircrews, operating undercover, joined him there, but the base was never called by name. It was always referred to as “Alternate.” Vang Pao’s civil headquarters, Sam Thong, was Lima Site 20. To avoid as much attention as possible, Long Tieng was dubbed 20-A, or 20-Alternate.

The ground war waxed and waned with the weather. During the annual dry season, from September to May, the Pathet Lao advanced. When the wet season came, the monsoon rains turned the roads to mud. The advantage shifted to the weaker government forces, which had the advantage of air support and mobility. Neither side was strong enough to decisively defeat the other.

Water Pump

After the North Vietnamese violated the 1962 Geneva agreement and joined the Pathet Lao in a renewed insurgency, Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma asked the United States for aircraft and supplies for the Royal Laotian Air Force. Deliveries of T-28s began in August 1963. Helicopters and light transports came later.

In April 1964, the Air Force sent a detachment of air commandos under Project Water Pump to train Laotian aircrews in counterinsurgency tactics



A-1 Skyraiders, such as the one shown here at a Southeast Asia airfield, had long loiter times, delivered close air support with great accuracy, and could fly from short airstrips.



and assist with aircraft maintenance. They were based at Udorn in northern Thailand, with forward operating locations at Wattay airfield in Vientiane and elsewhere in Laos. The air commandos trained not only Laotians but also Thai and Air America pilots as well.

There was no US military command in Laos. The Geneva agreement prohibited it, so under the "Country Team" policy, military matters were directed by the US ambassador in Vientiane. William H. Sullivan, who was ambassador from 1964 to 1969, was especially vigorous in the exercise of his authority. Military leaders, with whom he often clashed, called him the "field marshal."

Military Assistance Command Vietnam was not in the control chain for northern Laos. US Pacific Command in Hawaii held control of airpower in Barrel Roll, exercising direction through Pacific Air Forces and 7th Air Force in Saigon. Strike missions had to be approved by the ambassador. (See "Disunity of Command," January 2005, p. 34.)

The CIA had been operating in Laos since 1955, and in the absence of a US military presence, took the early lead in supporting the Vientiane government in the civil war. The Air America headquarters was at Udorn, but its paramilitary officers were with Vang Pao at Long Tieng and at other locations in Laos.

In May 1964, Air America pilots in T-28s with Laotian markings attacked targets on the PDJ. Some of the Water Pump pilots also secretly flew combat missions in support of the Laotian Army and Vang Pao's guerrillas.

Also in May, US jet aircraft began flying "Yankee Team" reconnaissance



At top, a USAF T-28 sits on the runway at Nakhom Phanom AB, Thailand. In April 1964, the US sent air commandos to train Laotian aircrews in counterinsurgency tactics and to assist with aircraft maintenance. Above, a PC-6 Turbo Porter sits among other aircraft at Udorn. These airplanes were flown by Air America in support of CIA operations.

missions in Laos over the Ho Chi Minh Trail and the PDJ. Two of the aircraft were shot down over the PDJ, and Air Force F-100s struck an anti-aircraft site there in response.

Water Pump commandos, enlisted airmen, and nonrated officers performed as forward air controllers for air strikes in Laos from 1964 until the spring of 1967. Using the call sign "Butterfly," they flew in Air America aircraft, spotting targets for T-28s as well as for jet aircraft diverted from North Vietnam to targets in Laos.

Eventually, the Water Pump contingent was folded into Project 404, a program under which US military

personnel wearing civilian clothes were assigned as additional "attaches" to the embassy in Vientiane.

Barrel Roll Begins

In August 1964, US ships in the Tonkin Gulf were attacked by North Vietnamese patrol boats. The Air Force moved into Southeast Asia in strength, and in November, a Viet Cong mortar attack at Bien Hoa, South Vietnam, killed four Americans and destroyed or damaged a number of aircraft.

Reprisal strikes, flown by Air Force and Navy aircraft against targets in the Laotian panhandle on Dec. 14, were designated Operation Barrel Roll. Rolling Thunder, the air war against North Vietnam, began in March 1965. In April, strikes against the Ho Chi Minh Trail in

the Laotian panhandle were designated as Operation Steel Tiger.

From then on, "Barrel Roll" meant the air war in northern Laos. The term referred both to the operations and to the geographic area in which they were conducted.

The United States was fighting in four separate theaters. There was a basic "in-country" war in South Vietnam, an air war in North Vietnam, an air campaign against the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and the civil war in Laos. Of the four, Barrel Roll had the lowest priority. Some sorties were allocated specifically for Laos, but most of the Barrel Roll strikes were by fighters that had been diverted, by



Aircraft such as this O-1 performed forward air control tasks. Water Pump commandos, enlisted airmen, and nonrated officers served in the FAC role from 1964 until the spring of 1967.

weather or other reasons, from targets in North Vietnam.

Sullivan, the “field marshal,” locked horns constantly with Gen. William W. Momyer, the commander of 7th Air Force from 1966 to 1968. Sullivan wanted more airpower dedicated to northern Laos. He also wanted a wing of propeller aircraft based at Nakhon Phanom Air Base in Thailand and placed under his operational control.

Momyer, who was as strong minded as Sullivan, refused. Momyer wanted central control of airpower to the extent possible. Others—especially the Army commanders in South Vietnam—were also clamoring for more air support. Until the bombing halt in North Vietnam in 1968, there were not enough sorties available to meet all demands.

Sullivan agreed with the view, prevalent among the air commandos, that propeller aircraft were better suited than jet aircraft for the war in Laos. Such vintage airplanes as the A-1 Skyraider had long loiter times, delivered close air support with great accuracy, and could fly from short airstrips. Air Force leaders believed that high-performance jet aircraft would be needed as the air defenses improved and anti-aircraft guns put slow movers at risk. Before it was over, nearly every kind of strike aircraft the Air Force had in Southeast Asia flew in Barrel Roll. Forty years later, the question of jet aircraft versus slow movers is still generating arguments.

The nonrated Butterfly FACs were replaced by Air Force pilots known by their call sign, “Raven.” The Ravens

were officially assigned to the special operations wing at Nakhon Phanom, but they were “on loan” to the air attache in Vientiane and flew from Long Tieng and other forward bases.

The Ravens wore civilian clothes, scorned traditional standards of discipline and behavior, and sometimes seemed to identify more with the Hmong and Air America than they did with the Air Force. They frequently grated on the nerves of the mainstream forces, but it was universally conceded that they were very good in the battle area. The Ravens worked both strikes by the Laotian T-28s—sometimes flying some

of the missions themselves—and by US fighters.

In one of the stranger twists in a strange war, the chief of the Laotian Air Force led an air strike by 20 T-28s on the general staff headquarters near Vientiane in a befuddled takeover attempt in October 1966. It failed, and the general and his pilots fled to exile in Thailand.

Both sides had their innings in the ground war. In August 1966, Vang Pao pushed to Nam Bac, within 45 miles of the North Vietnamese border. In July 1967, the North Vietnamese struck Luang Prabang airfield, destroying about a dozen T-28s of the Laotian Air Force. The strategic situation remained a stalemate.

“It was, in effect, the sort of warfare the North Vietnamese were fighting against our American units in South Vietnam,” Sullivan said. “On the map, it never showed any great permanent territorial gains, but it certainly prevented Hanoi from consolidating its annual effort into any lasting conquest.”

Barrel Roll Intensifies

The war changed character in 1968. In the Tet Offensive in January, the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong attacked bases all over South Vietnam. In Laos, the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao also stepped up the attack, overrunning Lima Site 85, a secret US Air Force radar bombing facility near the North Vietnamese border, on March 11. (See “The Fall of Lima Site 85,” April, p. 66.)



Photo via Warren Thompson

This Laotian Air Force T-28 was based at Korat AB, Thailand. In late 1966, the LAF chief led a failed takeover of the general staff headquarters near Vientiane. He and his pilots then fled in exile to Thailand.

US Attack Sorties 1968-1973

Location	Nov 1968-July 1970		Aug 1970-March 1972		April 1972-Feb 1973		Total	
	Sorties	%Total	Sorties	%Total	Sorties	%Total	Sorties	% by country
South Vietnam	239,952	48.8%	38,767	18.8%	80,921	53.9%	359,640	42.4%
North Vietnam	867	0.2%	1,702	0.8%	44,431	29.6%	47,000	5.5%
Cambodia	9,266	1.9%	25,065	12.2%	5,479	3.6%	39,810	4.7%
Laos Steel Tiger	186,755	38%	118,038	57.4%	12,087	8.0%	316,880	37.4%
Laos Barrel Roll	54,986	11.2%	22,179	10.8%	7,251	4.8%	84,416	10.0%
Total	491,826		205,751		150,169		847,746	

Until the halt of US bombing of North Vietnam in 1968, only a handful of strike sorties were allocated to Barrel Roll. After the bombing halt, however, the number of strikes in northern Laos increased sharply, even though operations in South Vietnam and in the Laotian panhandle had a higher priority. With "Vietnamization," the war began winding down. There were fewer total sorties flown, but Barrel Roll continued to get a significant share of them until 1972, when the airpower effort was redirected to respond to North Vietnam's "Easter invasion." With the resumption of bombing of North Vietnam in April 1972, operations in northern Laos diminished.

Source: Col. Perry L. Lamy, Air War College, 1995.

President Johnson announced a partial halt to the bombing of North Vietnam March 31 and a complete halt on Nov. 1. The Air Force had some 700 attack aircraft at bases in Thailand and South Vietnam. Air strikes that would otherwise have been flown against North Vietnam could be diverted elsewhere.

Most of the suddenly available sorties were allocated to South Vietnam and to interdiction of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, but northern Laos also got a sharp increase. Between 1965 and 1968, US sorties in Barrel Roll had averaged 10 to 20 a day. The tempo then rose sharply, peaking at 300 sorties a day at one point in 1969.

The enemy was more formidable as well. North Vietnamese army strength in Laos varied, but reached 70,000 in 1969. Combined with the Pathet Lao, that amounted to a communist force total of about 110,000, including support troops and combat engineers.

In 1969, the North Vietnamese broke their pattern of retreating with the onset of the annual rainy season. In June, they captured the PDJ and put pressure on Vang Pao's base at Long Tieng. In August, supported by a surge of strike sorties, Vang Pao counterattacked in an operation called "About Face" and—for the first time since 1960—seized the entire PDJ. Holding it proved to be more than the Hmong could manage, though, and in January 1970, the North Vietnamese recaptured the PDJ.

As the enemy rushed reinforcements and equipment to the PDJ in early 1970, officials in Washington took alarm. "That threatened Souvanna and our relations with him," said Henry A. Kissinger, then the national security advisor. "If

he abandoned his acquiescence in the bombing of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, Hanoi's logistic problem would be greatly eased, exposing us in South Vietnam to growing peril.

"Worse, if the North Vietnamese troops reached the Mekong, the war would lose its point for Thailand. Bangkok would then be under pressure along the hundreds of miles of the river dividing a plain without any other obstacles. We would almost certainly be denied use of the Thai air bases, essential for our B-52 and tactical air operations in Vietnam," Kissinger said.

For the first time, the United States used B-52 bombers in northern Laos, flying 36 sorties against North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao positions on the PDJ in February 1970. Nevertheless, the enemy remained strong enough to put Long Tieng under siege in March.

The CIA reinforced Vang Pao with mercenaries redeployed from southern Laos, and US and Laotian aircraft flew mission after mission against the enemy positions. Strikes by American gunships were especially effective. Two weeks later, the North Vietnamese and the Pathet Lao gave up the offensive and pulled back, lifting the pressure on the Long Tieng stronghold.

The Secret War Revealed

Eventually, the secrecy became posterous. From 1968 to 1970, half of the US attack sorties flown in all of Southeast Asia were flown in Laos. Even though reports of the war popped up periodically in major newspapers, the government continued to deny it.

Reporters were seldom allowed to visit the bases in Thailand from which most

of the Barrel Roll missions originated. Just in case, though, public information officers had a canned statement to read. "At the request of the Royal Laotian government, the United States has since 1964 been conducting reconnaissance flights over Laos escorted by armed aircraft," it said. "By agreement with the Laos government, the escort fighter aircraft may return fire if fired upon."

If a reporter should ask the Air Force about Air America, there was a canned response for that, too: "I suggest you ask Air America." The security was not perfect. Anyone looking at the Udorn base newspaper, for example, could determine the placement of the Air America bowling team in the league standings.

After the 1968 elections brought a Republican Administration to office, Congress—which had been in on the secret all along—began clamoring for disclosure.

"We have been at war in Laos for years, and it is time the American people knew more of the facts," Sen. Stuart Symington (D-Mo.) said in 1969. Symington had previously visited Nakhon Phanom and other bases in Thailand and was fully briefed.

"This was the culmination of a campaign extending over many months in the Senate and in the media to get at the 'truth' in Laos," Kissinger said. "The issue was not to obtain the facts—they were widely known—but to induce the government to confirm them publicly, which was quite a different matter. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee had substantially full knowledge from its staff investigations as well as from its classified hearings. Similarly, the



In the background, a T-28 is silhouetted against the darkening sky. In July 1967, the North Vietnamese struck Luang Prabang airfield, destroying about a dozen T-28s belonging to the Laotian Air Force.

media had given the public a reasonably accurate picture. The issue for us was to what extent an official acknowledgment of our operations in Laos would wreck what was left of the 1962 accords, give Hanoi a pretext for further stepping up its aggression in northern Laos, and fuel even more passionate controversy at home. Our role in Laos had been 'secret' in three Administrations of two parties precisely because each President wanted to keep it limited."

On March 6, 1970, President Nixon issued a lengthy statement on "the situation in Laos," in which he acknowledged that US aircraft were flying combat missions in northern Laos and against the Ho Chi Minh Trail in the Laotian panhandle.

The White House staff got some of their facts wrong in the statement, which said that no American stationed in Laos had ever been killed in ground combat. As it turned out, some 27 Americans had been killed there in the past year alone. The story of the secret war was finally out, but the controversy was far from over.

End of the Line

Vang Pao and the Hmong launched their last major offensive with the onset of the rainy season of 1971. Aided by Thai mercenaries paid by the CIA, they captured the PDJ in July, only to lose it again to the North Vietnamese in December. It no longer mattered in the long run because the war was on a downhill slide.

The United States, having adopted

a policy of "Vietnamization," was steadily turning responsibility for the war over to the South Vietnamese government and drawing down its own forces in Southeast Asia. In 1971, only half as many US strike sorties were available as had been in 1969.

The war moved into its final phase with the North Vietnamese Army's "Easter invasion" of the south in 1972. Some of the US aircraft that had left the theater returned, but that did not mean an increase in sorties for Barrel Roll. The bombing of North Vietnam resumed with Operation Linebacker I in May 1972, creating a new priority that further reduced the allocation of airpower for Laos. The Linebacker II bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong pushed the peace talks toward their conclusion.

Laos was supposedly provided for in the Paris peace agreement, signed Jan. 27, 1973. Both sides promised to respect the 1962 Geneva accords and withdraw their troops from Laos. Souvanna Phouma and the Pathet Lao set Feb. 22 as the date for the cease-fire to take effect.

As before, the United States stopped its bombing operations on schedule and the North Vietnamese violated the truce. At Souvanna's request, US aircraft flew several more support strikes, but the final missions were against targets south of the PDJ on April 17.

Operation Barrel Roll was over. During its nine-year run, 131 US military aircraft had been lost in northern Laos. Air America operations continued until June 1974.

A coalition government was set up in Vientiane with Souvanna Phouma as its head, but that was a temporary expedient. When the North Vietnamese moved into Saigon for their final victory in 1975, the Pathet Lao—supported by more than 50,000 North Vietnamese troops who were still in Laos—seized power.

Souvanna Phouma "retired." King Savang Vatthana abdicated, bringing the 600-year-old Laotian monarchy to an end. It was replaced Dec. 2, 1975 by the Lao People's Democratic Republic. Officials of the former government were sent to labor camps for "re-education." Military personnel above the rank of lieutenant were considered war criminals. Vast numbers of Hmong crowded into refugee camps in Thailand. Vang Pao, flown out on an American C-130, came to the United States, living first in Montana and then in California.

Air America went out of business June 30, 1976. Upon its liquidation, the CIA returned more than \$20 million to the US Treasury.

Aftermath in Laos

The new regime in Laos ruled with communist fervor. The practice of Buddhism was curtailed in 1976. Even today, monks get political training to ensure their teaching is in step with government policy.

In 1977, the former king and his family were imprisoned in a cave in a remote area of Laos. They later died there from lack of adequate food and medical care.

In 1987 and 1988, Laos and Thailand fought a three-month border war, but tensions have since eased between the two nations.

A remnant of the Hmong forces, living in the mountains near the Plain of Jars, carries on an insurgent resistance against the Pathet Lao regime. The government has periodically conducted reprisals.

Unexploded bombs from the war are a hazard on the Plain of Jars, but parts of the PDJ have become a tourist attraction where visitors can see hundreds of the ancient stone jars that are still there. ■

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