The War in Northern Laos

With the FAR out of combat, the continued survival of the Laotian government hinged more and more on the Meo guerrillas of General Vang Pao and the support of the U.S. Air Force. Of course, Ambassador Sullivan had been concerned about the level of air support—and his control over it—ever since he arrived in Laos. In theory, President Johnson's March 11, 1966, directive had resolved this issue. It gave the Joint Chiefs of Staff/National Security Council direct control of Rolling Thunder, MACV responsibility for South Vietnam and the infiltration routes through southern Laos, and the Vientiane embassy control of operations in northern Laos. Ambassador Sullivan additionally retained some influence over operations in southern Laos through his control of the rules of engagement. Over the years, however, General Westmoreland had basically tucked this area into his domain.

The Seventh Air Force was tasked to support all three areas, with first priority going to General Westmoreland's command and second priority to Rolling Thunder.[35] Therefore, the majority of the air strikes in northern Laos were weather diverts from North Vietnam or Steel Tiger.

In effect, the ambassador had the responsibility but not the resources. The Seventh Air Force had the resources but not the responsibility (beyond the fuzzy stricture to support the Royal Laotian Government on a "recurring basis"). The air attaché and Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force had neither the resources nor the responsibility, but were thrust in between the other two. All parties considered this a completely unworkable arrangement, but they could not come up with an acceptable alternative.

Consequently, Seventh Air Force resisted providing a higher level of air support without having a say in its use. This was something the embassy, and more so the CIA, were never willing to grant. For "security reasons" the CIA refused to share its plans with the Air Force. The agency thought it possessed the expertise to plan and direct air operations and expected the Air Force to simply furnish the planes and crews to be used (misused in the view of the Seventh Air Force) as the CIA saw fit.

The Seventh Air Force questioned the need for "security" and challenged the agency's expertise in air operations. In the Air Force view, the CIA was too parochial, centering on events in northern Laos and disregarding theater-wide commitments; and the airmen felt the CIA could not adequately plan and direct air operations in support of Laotian ground forces. What the Air Force wanted was consultation during initial planning, allowing the Air Force to determine where, when, and how many planes were needed. In the words of Maj. Gen. Louis T. Seith, deputy commander of Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force: "We have been pressing CAS [CIA] for ten months to bring us in on their planning when it is originally conceived. Conversations did no good and written requests were initiated."[36]

This conflict simmered beneath the surface throughout the war, emerging from time to time in various forms (Bango/Whiplash, rules of engagement, sortie allocation, etc.). In all of these, the core issue was close air support for the Meo, though it was usually couched in terms of interdiction. In late 1967, this clash spilled over into the prop versus jet controversy.

In September, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Systems Analysis prepared a study comparing the relative effectiveness of propeller and jet aircraft in destroying trucks. Based on the first eight months of 1967, the study showed prop aircraft to be nearly ten times as effective as jets, but with a loss rate four times greater. The analysis revealed that jet aircraft flew 74 percent of the attack sorties in Laos but accounted for only 25 percent of the destroyed or damaged (366 vehicles destroyed/damaged for 22,599 sorties or 1.4 trucks per 100 sorties at

35. In practice, when the Joint Chiefs of Staff/National Security Council released a target in North Vietnam, General Momyer threw everything he had against it, regardless of the situation in the south.

36. EOTR, Maj Gen Louis T. Seith, Dep Comdr, 7th AF/13th AF, Mar 27, 1969.

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a cost of seven hundred thousand dollars per truck). Prop aircraft, on the other hand, flew 25 percent of the sorties (7,810), yet destroyed or damaged 72 percent of the trucks (966) or 12.3 per 100 sorties at a cost of fifty-five thousand dollars per truck.[37] During these operations, eight jet and twelve prop planes were lost, giving a loss rate of 0.37 per 1,000 sorties for the jets and 1.25 per 1,000 sorties for the prop aircraft.[38]

Weighing the alternative courses of action, the study concluded that substitution of two A–1 squadrons for a like number of F–4s would result in an increase of one thousand trucks per year destroyed or damaged against an additional loss of eight aircraft a year. The study noted, however, that the scarcity of prop planes in the USAF inventory would restrict further deployments to Southeast Asia. As of June 30, 1967, the Air Force had twenty-seven T–28s with twelve already deployed to Southeast Asia and eight to Panama. Twelve of thirty-one A–26s were also in Southeast Asia, as were fifty of the eighty-nine A–1s in the USAF inventory. Transfers from the U.S. Navy and the Vietnamese Air Force could add another one hundred fifty A–1s to the pot. The study considered the A–1 the sole viable candidate for additional deployments, but warned that if all these planes were made available, there would not be sufficient replacement aircraft to maintain a viable prop force beyond 1970. Indeed, any buildup in enemy defenses—which the study judged likely—would boost the projected loss rate and dictate an earlier conversion to jets.

> As the U.S. improved its capability to impede infiltration and supply in the Laotian corridor (either with propeller aircraft or other means) the North Vietnamese are likely to increase their AAA defenses in the area . . . the use of propeller aircraft in such a heavily defended environment will increase the attrition rates and might degrade their effectiveness. . . . As the AAA density increases, we might be forced to replace the propeller aircraft with jets or sustain very high loss rates.[39]

In other words, the Air Force would ultimately have to go to an all jet force.

Copies of the study were sent to both Saigon and Vientiane with a cover letter that warned "In view of the above and 7th Air Force judgment that jets are more flexible operationally, I doubt that further action on this matter is worthwhile."[40] Apparently the Saigon embassy opted to pursue the subject anyway. A memo to Eugene M. Locke, the deputy ambassador, bearing the initials "EB" (Ellsworth Bunker?) said, "It seems to me that if, as the attached report indicated, propeller aircraft are approximately ten times as effective as jet aircraft, the logic is inescapable that we ought to secure as many as we can for the Laos operation."[41]

Ambassador Sullivan also pursued the issue—on November 15, during a visit by Lt. Gen. Glen W. Martin, Deputy Chief of Staff, Plans and Operations, USAF, he cited the study to support his bid for more sorties in northern Laos. The present sorties, he said, were doing a good job but there were too few of them. He further recognized that many of the targets were more political than military, but argued the necessity to show the Royal Laotian Government that the United States was interested in the flow of supplies westward as well as southward.

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37. The study did not account for the remaining 3 percent of the trucks destroyed or damaged. Presumably they were destroyed by ground action, that is, roadwatch teams, Shining Brass, etc.

38. Study, ASD/SA, Analysis of the Use of Propeller vs Jet Aircraft in Laos, Sep 29, 1967. Five tables of statistics accompanied this study. Comparing these figures with the conclusions in the narrative, the author found numerous discrepancies. No explanation for these discrepancies can be offered.

39. *Ibid.*

40. Ltr, Victor K. Heymand, Dir/SEA Prgms Div, ASD/SA, to Honorable Eugene M. Locke, Dep Amb, Saigon, Oct 2, 1967.

41. Memo, Ofc/Amb to Dep Amb Eugene M. Locke, Saigon, Oct 27, 1967.

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