

The War in Northern Laos

space. PACAF stressed that the mission had to succeed on the first try. Otherwise, the communists would revert to night operations at once.⁴

4. (U) Souvanna approved the daylight intercepts—now coded Duck Soup—on June 2. Ground rules laid down by the JCS, Ambassador Sullivan, and the 2d Air Division specified that the North Vietnamese transports must be engaged in aerial supply when taken under fire. For this purpose, four Whiplash F-105s would stand alert at Korat from late afternoon until darkness. If scrambled by the deputy commander's ASOC, they were to fly at low level, staying clear of communist radar, Samneua, and all known flak batteries. The ASOC would monitor 34-A missions and civilian aircraft, feeding the information to the Duck Soup flight so there would be no inadvertent shutdown. In addition, a FAG team from Na Khang (Lima Site 36) would help direct the fighters to the latest enemy resupply [redacted] personnel would send any information directly to the FAG team for retransmitting to the victor control ship, which would act as a radio relay between the ground and the Duck Soup flight. Direct communication between the interceptors and FAG team was authorized, however.⁵

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5. (U) Duck Soup ran into snags from the start. The June 5 losses of a Navy F-4 and an Air Force F-105⁶ and the subsequent search and rescue pulled the Air America C-123 off alert and into the air. Three days later, Sullivan called on General Moore to substitute the HU-16 Albatross or the Udom-based HC-54 control ship⁷ for the Victor C-123, which was needed to help haul supplies to Lima Site 36 for Vang Pao's summer offensive. No sooner was this switch approved than Sullivan asked that all Duck Soup aircraft stand down until June 21 to place Air America airlift on a full-day rather than a half-day basis. Meantime, the ambassador promised to examine the current intelligence on North Vietnamese aerial resupply. If necessary, he would suggest changes in the current procedures governing alert and control aircraft.⁸ By June 18, Sullivan concluded that the Air America airlift could not revert to flying only in the morning. To keep the supplies flowing to Vang Pao and the scattered Meo outposts in Samneua Province, the airline's C-47s had to work into the late afternoon. This cut any chance of a Duck Soup intercept to roughly two hours before sunset and at night. Given these conditions, 2d Air Division recommended the program be canceled.⁹

6. (U) To save Duck Soup, Sullivan proposed an alternative he felt was practical and relatively simple. It avoided stopping the supply flights and lessened the chances of a "misdirected intercept." Under this plan, only assets in Laos would be used. Two RLAF T-28s would be moved to Vang Pao's Military Region II headquarters at Long Tieng, which had a recently lengthened 4,200-foot runway and excellent communications to Vientiane [redacted]. The fighters would be flown by Air America pilots thoroughly familiar with the terrain and

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4. (U) Msgs, CINCPACAF to CINCPAC, 291935Z May 65, 13th AF, 311235Z May 65.

5. (U) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC, SECSTATE, 1950, Jun 2, 1965, 2d AD to 6234th TFW, Dep Comdr/2d AD, et al, 030853Z Jun 65, AIRA Vientiane to 2d AD, 2621, 030950Z Jun 65, 2626, 041212Z Jun 65.

6. (U) Sullivan described June 5 as "another day of fun and games which included such features as an F-105 pilot parachuting into the suburbs of Vientiane and checking into the Embassy for a change of clothes and a ride home." [Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC, date-time group blurred.]

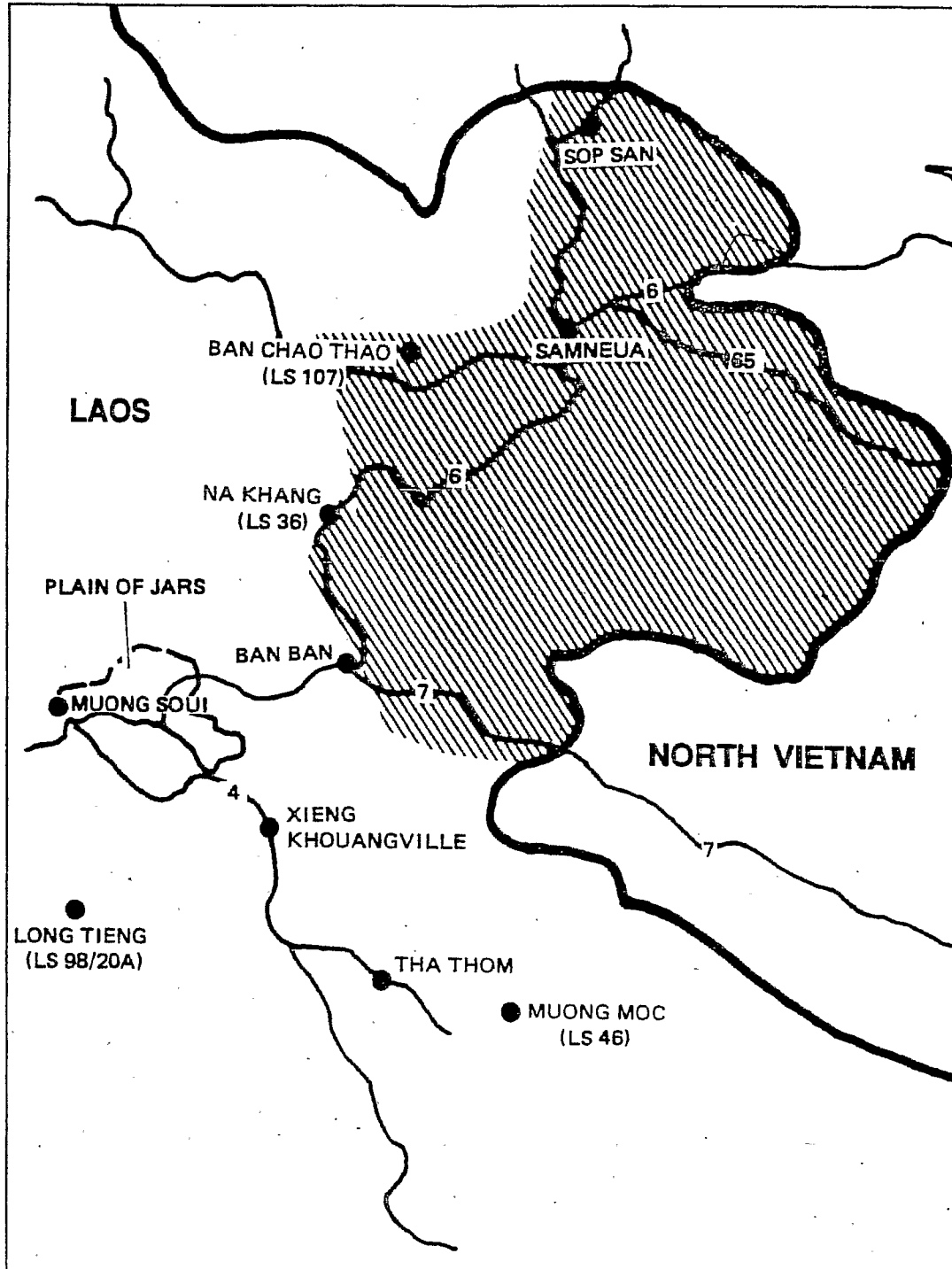
7. (U) Three HC-54s on rotational temporary duty from Guam and Tachikawa AB, Japan, had just arrived at Udom to assume the HU-16's duties. The HU-16s were soon transferred to Da Nang and limited to missions in the Gulf of Tonkin. The HC-54s, with their higher ceilings, were better suited for operating over the mountainous terrain of northern Laos; but they were not properly equipped to act as a flying command post, lacking adequate backup communications and special control equipment for assuming effective direction of a search and rescue mission. In December 1965, two HC-130s arrived as replacements for the HC-54s, which were phased out by April 1966. [Capt B. Conn Anderson, USAF, *USAF Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia, 1961-1966* (Project CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1966), pp 42-43.]

8. (U) Msgs, Dep Comdr/2d AD to 2d AD, 080913Z Jun 65, CINCPACAF to CINCPAC, 110030Z Jun 65, AmEmb Vientiane to 2d AD, 111110Z Jun 65, CINCPAC to CINCPACAF, 160006Z Jun 65.

9. (U) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to 2d AD, SECSTATE, 2047, Jun 18, 1965, SECSTATE, 2079, Jun 25, 1965.

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Duck Soup Operating Area



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operating conditions in northern Laos. They would be given enemy aircraft identification training before deployment. Their planes, armed only with .50-caliber machineguns, would stand daily alert until five in the evening, when they would take off from Long Tieng and be in the vicinity of the most recent sightings within twenty minutes. They would then loiter to dusk before flying back to Udom. If a North Vietnamese transport was seen, the T-28s would give chase but withhold fire until the FAG team at Lima Site 36 approved. Since Souvanna had agreed to Duck Soup, Sullivan envisioned no problem in getting him to accept this modified plan but did not foresee the State Department's opposition.¹⁰

Leonard Unger, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, put Sullivan on notice that State was not willing to run the risk of Americans flying T-28s in Laos, except during an emergency search and rescue mission in planes marked with U.S. insignia. He thought the use of Laotian [redacted] for Duck Soup should be explored. With all the pilots trained by Water Pump, surely Sullivan could find two such individuals. Like Air America personnel, they should undergo intensive aircraft identification training before being sent to Long Tieng. To make sure the Laotian [redacted] fully understood the instructions passed to them, Unger suggested stationing reliable interpreters in the Vientiane air operations center and with the forward air guide at Lima Site 36. Lastly, the former ambassador said there was no evidence of Soviet involvement in the airlift; but if their participation became evident, all intercepts were forbidden.¹¹

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The Joint Chiefs reminded Admiral Sharp that Duck Soup had been laid on by the "highest authority," and that he and Ambassador Sullivan should come up with a solution, preferably one not using U.S. personnel. Sharp, however, sided with Sullivan; it was better for American pilots to tackle such a sensitive undertaking than the Laotians [redacted]. If an American pilot was shot down, the admiral felt the chances of his falling into the wrong hands could be reduced by enlarging the search and rescue force during all Duck Soup operations.¹²

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Meanwhile, Colonel Tyrrell and General Murphy had a back-to-the-drawing-board session at Udom, trying to hammer out a plan acceptable to Washington. The air attaché and deputy commander decided to substitute Bango F-4Cs for the T-28s. The Udom jets would pull ground alert beginning at five each evening, allowing Air America time to complete resupply missions in northeast Laos before having to clear the area. If the Lima Site 36 forward air controller did not call for a scramble, the F-4s would take off at dusk for an airborne alert in the general vicinity of Na Khang. If a North Vietnamese transport showed up and sufficient light remained for a positive identification before making a firing pass, the FAC would call in the F-4s. (Tyrrell and Murphy also held that the A-1Es were just as reliable for this type mission as jets.)¹³

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After consulting with Ambassador Sullivan on July 18, Admiral Sharp again stated that the best solution was to station two T-28s with Air America pilots at Long Tieng and to follow the format sketched out by the ambassador, including the additional SAR forces. Tyrrell's and Murphy's F-4 proposal was acceptable, since it also included American personnel. Sharp thought it was time for the Joint Chiefs to convince the State Department to modify its objections to Air America pilots flying intercept missions. The chiefs dropped the impasse into McNamara's lap in the hope he could talk Secretary of State Rusk into reconsidering.¹⁴

Over the next month, Washington reviewed the intercept problem. On August 24, Undersecretary of State George W. Ball expressed strong reservations about these missions,

10. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 2079, Jun 25, 1965.

11. Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 1121, Jun 30, 1965.

12. Msgs, JCS to CINCPAC, 5168, 031650Z Jul 65, CINCPAC to AmEmb Vientiane, 032317Z Jul 65.

13. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC, SECSTATE, 18, Jul 6, 1965.

14. Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 180035Z Jul 65; memo, Blouin to Friedman, Sep 7, 1965.

See-Saw on the Plain

particularly when the last sighting (from a non-American source, at that) had been on June 21. Furthermore, the Pentagon was troubled over the number of aircraft that would be tied down on alert. The State Department's stance compelled Sullivan to closely reexamine Duck Soup. Although enemy transports were spotted on July 15 (several at night), July 25 (two in the late afternoon), and on August 10 (several at night), he now deemed the flights too few to justify a full-time alert. The downturn in sightings was partially attributed to poor weather, but GCI radars showed that the North Vietnamese had gone back to flying chiefly at night. Since there were no all-weather interceptors in the theater he could call on, the ambassador sought discretionary authority to trigger Duck Soup when sightings and conditions warranted. He did not say if he would use the T-28s or F-4s but agreed to keep Washington informed. On September 2, Admiral Sharp endorsed Sullivan's position.¹⁵

Three weeks passed with no action on Sullivan's request. Finally, at the urging of the JCS, McNamara approached Rusk on September 24. He was told that Sullivan would not receive this authority because the drops had fallen off and were almost entirely at night. State further pointed out that, over the past five months, neither Souvanna nor any other RLG official had raised the resupply subject with the ambassador. The matter might logically be expected to come up if the airlift was hurting the Royal Laotian Government. In addition, it would be hard under international law for Washington to claim prisoner-of-war status for Air America pilots since they were actually U.S. civilians. If captured, they might be treated as "unprivileged belligerents," and capture would confirm to the communists the paramilitary nature of Air America. This information was furnished Sullivan on the 28th, but the State Department wanted him to understand it had not closed the door to using Air America pilots in T-28 intercepts. If enemy aerial resupply resumed in force, the decision would be reexamined.¹⁶

Sullivan realized that State was set against Duck Soup. In early October, when Maj. Gen. Ouane Rathikone, RLA Chief of Staff, reported that Il-14s were making occasional daylight drops in Luang Prabang Province from the general area of Dien Bien Phu, Sullivan did not ask for reactivation of the intercepts. Instead, he promised Ouane he would see if U.S. strikes could be cycled against Dien Bien Phu in the hope of catching some of the transports on the ground. However, when the ambassador sent the information to COMUSMACV, it was in an almost offhand manner—if Westmoreland had a few spare aircraft he did not have targets for, he might find it profitable to schedule them against the Dien Bien Phu airfield.¹⁷

Duck Soup was not considered again, and an incident in South Vietnam in mid-September may have had a bearing on this, even though the incident was not mentioned in any State Department cables to Sullivan. Two F-100s made a pass so close to an ICC C-46 that the startled commission pilot nearly lost control of his plane. The ICC sent a strong protest to Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, and the 2d Air Division investigated the matter. Although the pilots were cleared, State could not understand how Air Force fighters could intercept an aircraft that had "ICC" stenciled in large letters on the wing and fuselage. If this could happen in the clear weather and broad daylight of South Vietnam, the chances for mistakes were much higher in Laos where the weather was poor and there were innumerable nonmilitary flights, including two a week between Hanoi and Vientiane. Since the intercepts were limited to the late afternoon and twilight, the odds against positive identification and for an inadvertent shootdown were far higher. The near miss in South Vietnam may well have ended any State Department endorsement of Duck Soup.

15. Msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 130, Aug 24, 1965, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 220, Aug 28, 1965, CINCPAC to JCS, 020537Z Sep 65.

16. Memo, SECDEF to CJCS, subj: Enemy Resupply Activity Northern Laos Duck Soup, Sep 24, 1965; msg, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 192, Sep 28, 1965.

17. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to COMUSMACV, SECSTATE, 330, Oct 4, 1965.