The "secret" war in Laos was a sideshow to the main war in Vietnam—and the crossroads of it lay here.

The Plain of Jars

By Walter J. Boyne

THE Plain of Jars is a 500-square-mile, diamond-shaped region in northern Laos, covered with rolling hills, high ridges, and grassy flatlands. Its average altitude is about 3,000 feet. It derives its name from the hundreds of huge gray stone "jars" that dot the landscape. About 5 feet high and half again as broad, these containers were created by a people of a megalithic iron-age culture and probably served as burial urns. Exactly who created them, and why their culture disappeared, is not known.

During the long Southeast Asian war, all sides found the Plain of Jars to be situated in a highly strategic location. The area was a home to several airfields and contained a limited road complex that connected various sectors of Laos to themselves and to the outside world. This crossroads has been a battleground for centuries but never so intensively as in this century's many overlapping conflicts in Indochina.

The struggle for the Plain of Jars in Laos in the 1960s and 1970s was a mysterious and tragic affair, wrapped up in confusion and obscured by years of falsehoods and half-truths. It was a sideshow to the main war in Vietnam, but it was ennobled by some of the finest and most heroic flying in the history of the United States Air Force.

These valiant efforts were designed to support US–backed forces and destroy communist North Vietnamese units that opposed them. The many campaigns in the Plain of Jars were fought in parallel with a continuing bombing effort against the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The latter campaign would prove to be futile, for enemy activities in South Vietnam could be sustained on as little as 60 tons of supplies a day—the equivalent of about 30 trucks' worth of materiel.

This Was the Home Team

The Royal Laotian Air Force made its first-ever strike on Jan. 11, 1961, using its entire operational fleet of four North American AT-6 aircraft, equipped with wing-pylon mounted rockets. Ten AT-6s had been provided, but there were not enough pilots to fly them.

The US arranged for training in Thailand, with the Waterpump program opening at Udorn in 1964. The RLAF began an expansion that would see it receive 60 North American T-28Ds as its main attack force, supplemented by about 50 transports and 30 helicopters.

Like their infantry colleagues, few Laotian pilots were aggressive, and on critical missions the T-28s were often flown by Air America, Thai, or occasionally Raven FACs. A small number of Hmong pilots were trained, and despite their primitive upbringing in which the most advanced technology might have been a flintlock rifle, they proved to be exceptional. One, Lee Lue, a cousin of Vang Pao, was the veritable Hans-Ulrich Rudel of the Laotian war. The Raven FACs loved to work with him, for they considered him the best fighter–bomber pilot they had ever known. Lee Lue flew continuously, as many as 10 missions a day and averaging 120 combat missions a month to build a total of more than 5,000 sorties. Physically ravaged by fatigue and the endemic tropical diseases of the area, he literally flew until he was killed, shot down by heavy anti-aircraft fire July 12, 1969. Had the RLAF had more Lee Lues, the outcome of the war might have been different.

Photos by Darrel Whitcomb

At the strategic Plain of Jars, US–backed forces fought North Vietnamese army and Pathet Lao units.

The Secret War

The Laotian war was a "secret" war, by tacit agreement of both sides. It was nominally a civil war, purportedly reflecting the divided interests and political loyalties of members of the Laotian royal family. In fact, the war was fought largely by surrogates for their own aims, the Laotians proving generally to be peace-loving even when—especially when—in uniform.

The communist force comprised tough, regular North Vietnamese army units and supplementary—and generally not very effective—local Pathet Lao units. They were opposed by the very ineffective Royal Laotian armed forces, whose leaders preferred to let the despised Laotian hill people, the Hmong, do the real fighting. The US supplied airpower on a very limited scale, initially, but in greater and greater amounts as the war progressed.

As the Hmong casualties rose, the US–sponsored fighting forces were increasingly augmented by Thai "volunteers," whose numbers eventually reached 17,000. These mostly were mercenaries paid with US funds and led by the Thai army's regular officers and noncommissioned officers.

The situation suited the US, which was loath to introduce American ground forces. The Hmong were supported by airpower and supplied by the CIA. Coincidentally, the North Vietnamese also were content to let the war simmer, as long as they could protect traffic along the ever-growing Ho Chi Minh Trail. Air sorties against the Plain of Jars tied up US military assets that otherwise would be used to bomb the trail. North Vietnam was confident that, when South Vietnam fell, Laos would fall.

The worst result of the 14-year struggle for the Plain of Jars was the destruction of a noble ally, the Hmong. They fought in countless battles against North Vietnamese forces and were in the end left to their fates. Originally numbering about 300,000 people, living high on mountain ridges and subsisting by means of slash-and-burn agricultural techniques, the Hmong suffered some 30,000 casualties, mostly young fighting men.

The Hmong families were driven from their homes to CIA–supported hilltop encampments, where they were fed by "soft rice drops" and armed by "hard rice drops." When the end came, those who could do so fled to camps in Thailand. Those who chose to remain in Laos were for years hunted down and killed by Laotian communists. A few Hmong relocated to the US.

The war was fought through the years on a seasonal basis, with US–sponsored forces advancing from April through September in the monsoon season and the North Vietnamese and its allies responding during the dry season of October through March. Perhaps unique to this ebb-and-flow war was an unusual vertical separation of territory, for the Hmong often dominated mountains and ridges even when the Pathet Lao or North Vietnamese owned the valleys below. It should be noted that the lowland Laotians discriminated against the hill people.

Laos is a landlocked country that shares a border with Cambodia, China, Thailand, Vietnam, and Burma (now called Myanmar). Its recorded history starts with the Lao kingdom of Lan Xang, founded in the 1300s. It has since suffered through six centuries of more or less unbroken warfare. In 1907, France established the modern borders of Laos, primarily to serve as a bulwark against Thai and Chinese expansion into

what was then French Indochina. It was granted independence in 1953.

In the Beginning

The communist influence in Laos originated with the 1950 creation of the Pathet Lao by Prince Souphanouvang and a hard-core communist from Hanoi, Kaysone Phomvihan. The US backed an unusual dual-regime arrangement consisting of Prince Souvanna Phouma and his neutralist government and that of the right-wing General Phoumi Nosavan.

Ultimately, the combination of Hanoi's interference and attempts by the US to control the development of internal Laotian affairs precipitated a crisis in 1962. Open warfare was averted, and despite the intensity that the conflict would reach over the next 13 years, both the US and North Vietnam would steadily deny any official involvement of regular ground forces in Laos.

The war would see Laos divided into three regions of de facto foreign control. The Vietnamese controlled the east, the area which became a corridor for the Ho Chi Minh Trail; US and Thai forces controlled the west, while the Chinese controlled the north, where they had enormous gangs of laborers building roads and railways for future use.

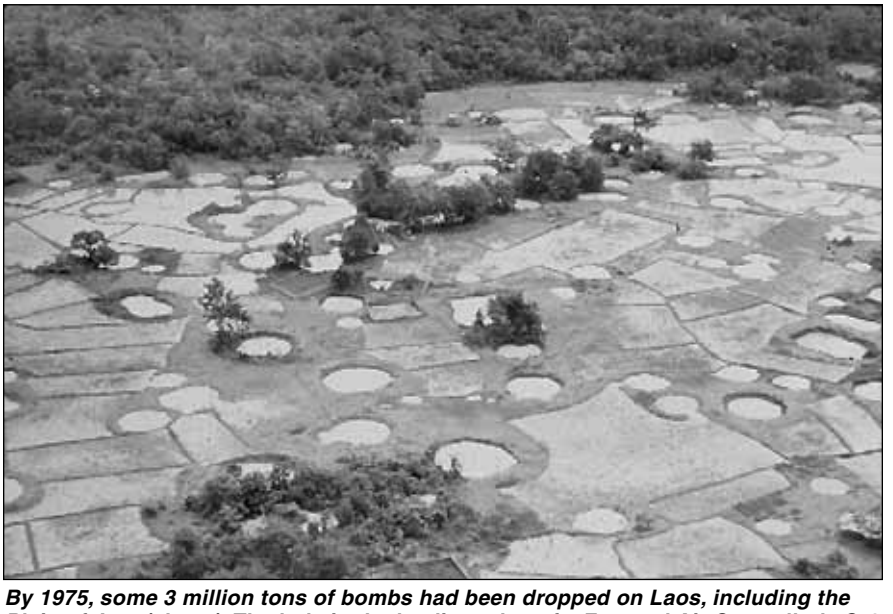
As the US became ever more involved in the war in Vietnam, the importance of Laos and the Plain of Jars grew. Things remained relatively stable until 1968, with each side advancing during the season appropriate to it.

In 1968, however, things began to change. President Lyndon B. Johnson's declaration of a bombing halt over North Vietnam caused the intensity of the fighting—and the air war—to increase drastically in two Laotian theaters: the Plain of Jars and the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The conduct of the war in northern Laos was delegated to the CIA–supported Hmong, who were led by a classic Asian warlord figure, Maj. Gen. Vang Pao. Napoleonic in stature and ambition, Vang Pao, had worked at age 13 with France against Japan and later against the Viet Minh, predecessors of the Viet Cong. He did so well that he was selected for officer training. In 1961 he was recruited by the CIA to serve as Hmong leader.

Type A Leader

Vang Pao was a type A personality, an enthusiastic and demanding leader, willing to do the dirty work himself and more than willing to lead in combat. He was trusted by the Americans, who delivered to him something no Lao leader had ever possessed, massive logistical support and airpower. He expanded the number of Hmong personnel under arms until they eventually numbered some 40,000. He saw to it that they were trained and well-equipped and led them first in guerrilla warfare and finally in conventional warfare against the North Vietnamese. Vang Pao was always proudly conscious that he was a Hmong who had made good in competition with the lowland (read, "highbrow") Laotians.

His leadership style led to



Photos by Darrel Whitcomb

By 1975, some 3 million tons of bombs had been dropped on Laos, including the Plain of Jars (above). The hole in the leading edge of a Forward Air Controller's O-1 below shows that threats from ground forces were always a danger.

some monumental victories but also caused some heavy defeats. His tactics resulted in heavy casualties over the years, so much so that eventually only preteen-age children and men over 45 remained to serve as soldiers. Everyone else had been killed, captured, or wounded. To spur recruitment, he would withhold rice from communities that sought to shield their young from joining his armies.

Nonetheless, in a country where fighters were few and fighting leaders almost non-existent, Vang Pao established himself as the man to deal with, and he was generally admired by the Americans who flew in his support, whether with the CIA–operated airlines or with the Ravens, the covert US Air Force Forward Air Controllers.

The year 1968 proved to be a watershed period of the conflict in Laos. The North Vietnamese committed more and more regular army units, and the Hmong villages were overrun, forcing evacuations to CIA–maintained hillside encampments. A serious setback occurred in March when a secret US installation at Phou Phathi (Site 85) fell to a determined North Vietnamese attack. Fitted with a modified TSQ-81 radar and a TACAN installation, the station had been vital for raids on Hanoi. Despite desperate efforts by Vang Pao and heavy air support, the site succumbed to overwhelming North Vietnamese army strength, with a heavy loss of life.

By the end of 1968, Laos was swarming with about 40,000 North Vietnamese troops and about 35,000 Pathet Lao. The Royal Lao Army was characterized at the time as "overweight in generals and underweight in fighting." It had 60,000 troops but still had a preference for leaving the real fighting to the Hmong.

Vang Pao scored one more great success, reconquering the Plain of Jars in 1969 with a brilliant attack heavily supported by American airpower. However, North Vietnamese troops recaptured the Plain again in early 1970 and held the initiative from that point on, twice besieging Vang Pao in his huge secret main base at Long Tieng. By this time, Air America was keeping some 170,000 Hmong refugees alive with airdrops of rice, a situation that had gone on so long that Hmong children were said to believe that rice was not grown but simply fell from the sky.

Photo by Darrel Whitcomb

Air America flew in support of the Royal Laotian armed forces. The CIA–operated airline set up short runways (above), called Lima Sites, to transport arms, spies, equipment, and refugees and to carry out medevac missions.

The battles continued until US support ceased in 1973. Then the end came as predicted. Saigon fell April 30, 1975; Vang Pao and his family of six wives and 25 children flew out to Thailand on May 14. Thousands of Hmong followed by whatever means possible. The Pathet Lao announced their assumption of the government of Laos on Dec. 2, 1975.

Levels of Operations

Military aviation was seen in many forms and conducted at many levels of intensity in Laos over the course of the war. There were at least four general categories. The first, and the earliest, was the aircraft and airlift provided by the Soviet Union. The second was that furnished by the CIA, primarily by its proprietary, Air America. The third was the rather shaky support furnished by the Royal Laotian Air Force. (An exception was the excellent effort of Hmong pilots when, at last, they were trained to fly in the RLAF.) The fourth was the tremendous involvement of US airpower.

The story of CIA air operations has been told at length in several books, of which the most authoritative is Christopher Robbins' *Air America.* It began with the 1950 purchase by the CIA of Civil Air Transport, an airline started by Lt. Gen. Claire L. Chennault and Whiting Willauer. CAT operated not only as an actual commercial airline but also as a conduit for covert US intelligence operations. In 1959 it was renamed Air America.

The struggle for the Plain of Jars cried out for Short Takeoff and Landing aircraft and for helicopters; Air America responded by acquiring such aircraft and building Victor Sites, extremely short runways often on mountaintops. These later became known as Lima Sites, and their number reached 400 by 1972.

In 1962, Air America greatly expanded its fleet in Laos, acquiring some 24 twin-engine transports, including the workhorse C-46 and the C-123. A similar number of STOL aircraft, made up of Pilatus Porter and Helio Courier types were also brought into service, along with 30 helicopters.

The relations between the official US military and Air America were often blurred, as assets, including aircraft like the C-130, were transferred in secret when the need arose.

Air America eventually employed more than 300 pilots to fly in and out of Thailand and Laos. In 1970 alone, it carried more than 46 million pounds of food to the Laotian people. It also carried arms, spies, radar equipment, and refugees and flew medevac missions.

As the war progressed, its equipment became more sophisticated and its missions more demanding. Air America crews flew at low alti-

tudes and in bad weather to insert or extract agents and combat units far behind enemy lines. They conducted photoreconnaissance missions during the day and used night vision equipment and sophisticated electronics for night reconnaissance. Late in the war, they even dropped "hot soup"—that is, napalm—on enemy positions, rolling barrels out the rear of Caribous.

Always controversial, the Air America crews flew valiantly under extremely difficult conditions. As the military situation in the Plain of Jars deteriorated, Air America's operations became increasingly hazardous. The proprietary often undertook missions in adverse weather and with terrain conditions that would have grounded regular military operations.

The Rescue Role

Air America was for a time the only organization capable of conducting aerial rescues of downed American airmen. Eventually supplanted by strong USAF rescue forces, quick reaction times by Air America crews saved many an airman before regular rescue helicopters could arrive. They also operated as FACs when there was no alternative.

Unquestionably, some Air America pilots violated the law, sometimes conspiring in the shipment of contraband. The bottom line, though, is that Air America was asked to do jobs that Washington wanted done but could not or would not do itself. They did the jobs, at great risk, and suffered many casualties.

The first use of regular American airpower in Laos came in December 1960, when two reconnaissance missions were flown by the US air attaché's VC-47A. This was the harbinger of the future in more ways than one, for a unique situation developed in which the American ambassador in Laos was to become the controlling agency for the application of US airpower in Laos. The three American ambassadors in Laos during the long conflict all were powerful, assertive men who enjoyed directing military operations. They were Leonard Unger, William H. Sullivan, and George McMurtrie Godley. It was Sullivan who lobbied for the assignment of what became the 56th Special Operations Wing to Nakhon Phanom, Thailand. It scarcely needs to be noted that the USAF commanders did not enjoy the fact that an ambassador, however committed and enthusiastic, was directing air operations.

Photo by Darrel Whitcomb

On a tiny Lima Site, a T-28 and two Raven O-1s wait while a C-123 takes off (top photo). Air America helicopters, like this one, performed aerial rescues of US airmen, among the many jobs they carried out at great risk.

Reconnaissance operations continued with SC-47s, one of which was shot down Feb. 11, 1962. This aircraft type was to be replaced by the RT-33A from Udorn RTAB, Thailand. In December 1962, the US began to launch "Able Mable" flights by RF-101s of the 15th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron and the 45th TRS, operating out of Don Muang, near Bangkok, Thailand. For "protective reaction," the 510th TFS brought a detachment of F-100s while the 509th TFS provided a unit of F-102As.

Also in 1962, the buildup continued. Two squadrons of F-100D fighters were deployed to Takhli RTAB, Thai-

land. These were augmented by Marine UH-34D and A-4 units. It was for a time a combined operation, featuring an RAF Hawker Hunter squadron and Australian Sabre squadron.

The success of a March 1964 Pathet Lao offensive led to the use of "Yankee Team" armed reconnaissance, using a combination of USAF RF-101Cs and US Navy RF-8As and RA-3Bs. US air operations intensified in 1964, with the initiation of the long-lived Operation Barrel Roll, which endured until 1973. The first attack, by eight F-100s, took place June 9, against Pathet Lao anti-aircraft positions. It soon became obvious that US FAC aircraft were necessary to strike the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese forces. Initially called Butterfly, these FACs eventually were given the call sign Raven.

Photo via Darrel Whitcomb

In civilian clothes, without military ID, covert USAF FACs operated in Laos, supporting the Hmong troops. Among the last of these Ravens in the country were (l–r) Chuck Hines, Darrel Whitcomb, Craig Dunn, Terry Pfaff, and H. Ownby.

Greater Intensity

Beginning with the 1968 bombing halt over North Vietnam, Barrel Roll operations increased in intensity, and by 1970, B-52 sorties were called in to halt the North Vietnamese forces and keep them from overrunning Vang Pao's main camp at Long Tieng. The B-52 sorties built up at an amazing rate; by the war's end, some 3 million tons of bombs had been dropped on Laos, with 500,000 tons of this total dropped in the northern regions. The weight of bombs would enable besieged Hmong forces to hold on, favorably affecting the course of the war for as long as the B-52s continued to bomb.

Though the enemy feared the B-52 sorties, the Hmong were especially grateful for the AC-47 gunships, which were freed up for use in Laos after the arrival of the AC-119G/K gunships in Vietnam. The Spookys were perfect for Laos, where they were exceptionally useful in defending the mountaintop encampments of the Hmong. As the war went on, both AC-119s and AC-130s were increasingly used in Laos along the Ho Chi Minh Trail and in support of the Hmong.

Seasoned, combat-tested US Air Force FACs were recruited to fly as Ravens in what was called the Steve Canyon Program. It was known to be a very hazardous assignment. These Air Force officers worked in civilian clothes and carried no military identification, although enemy agents at Vientiane routinely photographed them upon arrival. Under Project 404, the umbrella program for covert Air Force activities in Laos, they were considered "loaned" to the US air attaché in Laos, who became their nominal Air Force commander. In the field, they actually performed missions under the command of the CIA and of the Laotian generals.

Never were there more than a few Ravens. Originally, the group numbered only two at a time. This number grew slowly to a maximum of 20 operating at one time. Ultimately, fewer than 300 persons served as Ravens during the course of the war. Their O-1s and T-28s were based at the five airfields where one found air operations centers: Vientiane, Pakse, Savannakhet, Long Tieng, and Luang Prabang. The Ravens flew from these fields or from Lima Sites controlled by the Hmong or the Royal Laotian Army.

The Ravens flew almost continuously, often exceeding 120 hours per month and sometimes directing more than 100 sorties a day against enemy targets. Informal statistics indicate that the Ravens suffered casualty rates as high as 30 percent. They gathered an intimate knowledge of their terrain, and many became extremely proud of and loyal to the work of the Hmong troops they were supporting. The Hmong in turn were grateful to the Ravens and gave them unconditional approval.

As one might expect of an organization forbidden to wear uniforms, led through a confusing chain of command, stationed in isolated outposts, and subjected to the utmost stress in battle, conventional Air Force discipline and decorum did not always prevail. Ravens became noted for an aggressive attitude, unusual dress, and a willingness to party. Their colorful history was recorded in another book by Christopher Robbins, *The Ravens*, and veteran Ravens will concede that the author got it mostly correct.

The tremendous fighting over and bombing of the Plain of Jars over a 14-year period decimated the population and destroyed its civilizational structures. Some Hmong returned to the plain to resume the timeless patterns of their lives. The seasons still come and go, the sky still fills with smoke from burning fields, and the mysterious jars still stand sentinel over the plain, now verdant with new life. ▪

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