



THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301

JCSM-461-67
19 Aug 67

MEMORANDUM FOR THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

Subject: Operations - Laos (C)

1. (S) As a result of discussions during your visit to the Far East, the Joint Chiefs of Staff have addressed the COMUSMACV proposal for ARVN airborne or ranger battalion operations in the PRAIRIE FIRE area of Laos (SOUTHPAW).

2. (S) COMUSMACV has recommended expanded operations in Laos in two proposed programs: PRAIRIE FIRE Phase III (organizing an indigenous guerrilla force in Laos) and SOUTHPAW (airmobile operations into Laos by regular GVN units).

3. (S) PRAIRIE FIRE Phase III provides for the establishment of a guerrilla force in southern Laos responsive to US direction to disrupt enemy infiltration into South Vietnam, contest control of critical areas, and support other operations. On 1 April 1967, CINCPAC recommended authority be granted to initiate PRAIRIE FIRE Phase III operations within the current PRAIRIE FIRE zone. JCSM-215-67, dated 20 April 1967, subject: "PRAIRIE FIRE - Phase III (U)," recommended that you approve PRAIRIE FIRE Phase III operations. On 5 July 1967, a memorandum by the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, was provided to the Under Secretary of State which requested his comments on the proposal.

4. (S) The essential elements of COMUSMACV's position on SOUTHPAW are:

a. SOUTHPAW involves airmobile raids by SVN battalions into small areas contiguous to the border. Probable initial raid will be into an enemy base area between Ashau Valley and the tri-border area. The operational concept will be supported by PRAIRIE FIRE units, tactical air, and B-52 strikes.

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b. Current authorized operations have been effective in making infiltration more costly and difficult. They have impeded but not stopped infiltration. Therefore, more dynamic ground effort is required that will keep the enemy's use of Laos from offsetting our effectiveness in SVN.

c. In view of the Geneva Accords of 1962 and in light of the present political climate, the authorization to use US troops in Laos seems remote. However, the use of RVNAF troops may be politically feasible and is militarily desirable.

d. No publicity would be given to SOUTHPAW, and a coordinated program should be developed to shield these operations from the press.

5. (TS) On 21 July 1967, CINCPAC recommended to the Joint Chiefs of Staff that regular ARVN units not be employed in Laos. The essential elements of CINCPAC's position are:

a. A longstanding objective in Laos is to expand secure areas without committing US prestige and ground forces.

b. A balanced covert program to counter infiltration into South Vietnam is being conducted and is being improved and expanded.

c. The commitment of an ARVN force into Laos would likely be opposed by a large North Vietnamese force, thus setting in motion a chain of events which could easily lead to a requirement to commit sizable US forces under unfavorable conditions.

d. ARVN is already overextended, and SOUTHPAW would have to be conducted at the expense of other programs.

e. SOUTHPAW would be an overt violation of the Geneva Accords and could seriously jeopardize Souvanna Phouma's government.

6. (TS) In addition to the ARVN forces involved, the execution of SOUTHPAW would require substantial US helicopter, airlift, artillery, tactical air support, and logistic support. This could be provided only at the expense of in-country programs.

7. (S) Politically and militarily it would be difficult to deny a request to help prevent the loss of a battalion-size unit. Therefore, if a RVNAF extraction force were not available or had been previously committed, US ground forces might be required to assist in relieving or extracting engaged ARVN forces. US forces committed to assist ARVN could be committed under conditions favorable to the enemy. Any significant commitment of US forces in such an operation could be subject to public disclosure.

8. (S) The Joint Chiefs of Staff consider that the political and military risks outweigh the merits of the proposed SOUTHPAW concept. Therefore, while future conditions may create a requirement for a reevaluation of SOUTHPAW-type operations, they recommend that implementation not be undertaken at this time.

For the Joint Chiefs of Staff:

Earle G. Wheeler

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FIRST CORRIGENDUM

Holders of JCSM-461-67, subject: "Operations - Laos (C)," are requested to insert "19 August 1967" under the JCSM number.

L. R. VASEY
R. J. HALLENBECK
Joint Secretariat

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