

FROM FLYING CLUB TO FRONT LINE



The Khmer Air Force at War 1970-1975

A civilian C-47 attempts to land at Pochentong airbase on March 16, 1975, as an ammunition dump burns in the background.

Ken Conboy

WHILE IN MOSCOW to negotiate an arms agreement, the Cambodian Head of State, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, got word on March 18, 1970, that he had been deposed in Phnom Penh by his Prime Minister, General Lon Nol. On the heels of this *putsch*, Cambodia took a dramatic diplomatic shift toward the West, effectively throwing the country on a collision course against a formidable alliance of North Vietnamese troops and indigenous Khmer Rouge communist guerrillas roaming the countryside.

As it faced this imminent confrontation, the Cambodian armed forces were decidedly ill-prepared. For years under the Prince's reign, the military had suffered from leadership dominated by sycophants, while the lower echelons were saddled with poor equipment and a lack of experience. Nowhere was this more true than in the air force.

Officially created in April 1954, the Aviation Royale Khmere (AVRK) had grown over the next decade in a series of fits and starts. One of the greatest handicaps to the fledgling force was its leader, Major General Ngo Hou. On account of his being Sihanouk's favourite medical advisor and personal pilot, Ngo Hou had been rewarded with the additional role of AVRK commander. Running the air force with complete autonomy, he spent most of his time flying the Prince around and managing his own dubious business interests.

Royal Flying Club

During those few times when Ngo Hou was paying attention to the AVRK, the results were almost always negative. For one thing, he had assembled an excessively diverse aircraft inventory, in part because he was getting kickbacks from certain aircraft manufacturers. By November 1963, the AVRK had 83 aircraft of 15 different types, hopelessly overwhelming the force's inadequate maintenance capability.

For another thing, Ngo Hou refused to retire obsolete or worn-out aircraft. In the words of the chief of the US Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG), Brigadier General Robert Taber, "The air force has the appearance of an aerial museum". Occasionally this had tragic results. For example, against MAAG advice the AVRK continued to use the ageing North American T-6G Texan for pilot training, even after losing four of them in accidents, the last of which cost two lives.

On August 31, 1963, amid deepening strains between Washington and

Phnom Penh, Sihanouk announced that Cambodia was to receive MiGs from the Soviet Union. As promised, three Mikoyan-Gurevich MiG-17 *Frescos*, a MiG-15UTI *Midget* and a Yakovlev Yak-18 *Max* trainer arrived by freighter on November 20. That same day, the Prince renounced all US military aid with effect from January 1, 1964.

With the US MAAG packing its bags, the AVRK leant increasingly on the Soviets, and later the Chinese, to equip its units. By the end of the decade, a total of 20 MiGs, eight Yak-18s, two Ilyushin Il-14 *Crate* transports, eight Antonov An-2 *Colt* general purpose biplanes, and two Mil Mi-4 *Hound* helicopters were delivered from these two sources.

That the AVRK was plagued with inept leadership and an antiquated, unstandardised fleet should have been areas of concern. For Sihanouk, however, such problems served his interests. This was because in several neighbouring countries, a powerful air force had directly threatened the seat of government. In Indonesia, for example, the air force had been heavily involved in an abortive communist plot in 1965 to seize control of Jakarta. In Laos, a failed air force *coup* attempt in 1966 had left parts of Vientiane in ruins. Several disgruntled air force pilots in South Vietnam, meanwhile, had unloaded their bombs over Saigon and then fled to Cambodia.

Unwilling to broker a similar challenge, Sihanouk was willing to let Ngo Hou alternately abuse and ignore the AVRK. Junior officers, many of whom hailed from the extended royal family, were never preened for higher responsibility. And while the force occasionally responded to border incursions by Thai and South Vietnamese aircraft, it justifiably earned its nickname of the *Phnom Penh Royal Flying Club*.

It was this 'flying club' which was suddenly thrust into war during March 1970. Out of necessity, changes came fast. First, with the Prince gone as head of state, the AVRK was renamed the Aviation National Khmer (AVNK). Second, Major So Satto was promoted to lieutenant colonel and took the top slot from Ngo Hou, who was accompanying Sihanouk at the time. Among the first contingent of Khmer pilots to graduate in 1955, So Satto had flown transports during the early 1960s, then became commander of the 1^{er} Groupe d'Intervention — 1st Intervention Group, the AVRK's strike component — in 1968. Since April 1969, he had been Ngo Hou's deputy, effectively running the force during the general's prolonged absences.

With So Satto at the helm, the AVNK began major operations against North Vietnamese military units occupying large sections of the eastern part of the country. Within a week after Lon Nol assumed power, the AVNK had



Major Norodom Vatvani, commander of the AVNK Air Academy at Battambang, in discussion with the US Air Attaché, 1971. After fleeing Cambodia from the Khmer Rouge in 1975, Vatvani returned to his country in the early 1990s and was promoted to commander of the reborn Royal Cambodian Air Force. (via Harry Amos)

flown nearly as many combat sorties as during the entire 16-year history of the AVRK. Many of these initial missions were conducted by MiG-17s, which unleashed bombs and machine-gun fire at tree-top level against North Vietnamese troops in Svay Rieng province. They were helped by the South Vietnamese; a move which, owing to Lon Nol's improved relations with the Saigon government, had resulted in Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) Douglas A-1 Skyraiders being dispatched beginning on March 20 to support pressured Cambodian garrisons along their common border.

With the onset of combat operations, it was apparent that the AVNK needed to expand fast. Already, Lon Nol had made back-channel appeals for military aid to a number of countries, including Thailand, Indonesia, and the US. France, which had been heavily involved with the Cambodian Air Force since its inception, was intentionally excluded. Over the following few

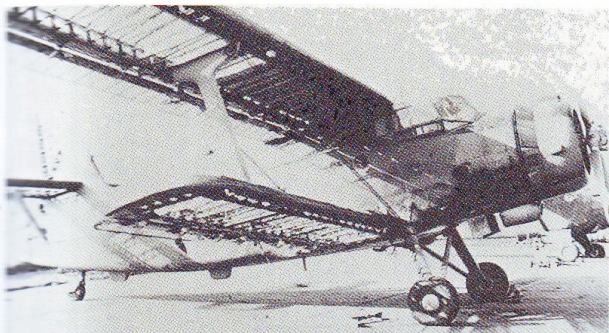
weeks, several further low-key aid requests went out from senior Cambodian military leaders. On April 10, So Satto took the initiative to meet with the acting US defence attaché and make his own pitch for a secret delivery of military equipment. While the attaché was non-committal during the session, a shipment of North American T-28 Trojan spares arrived in Phnom Penh within five days.

The arrival of the T-28 parts was timely. The US MAAG had delivered 16 T-28Ds back in August 1962, 15 of which were still listed on the inventory but largely grounded for lack of spares. By April 21, a flight of Trojans was able to take to the skies and strafe the communist-held town of Saang, 20 miles (32km) south of Phnom Penh.

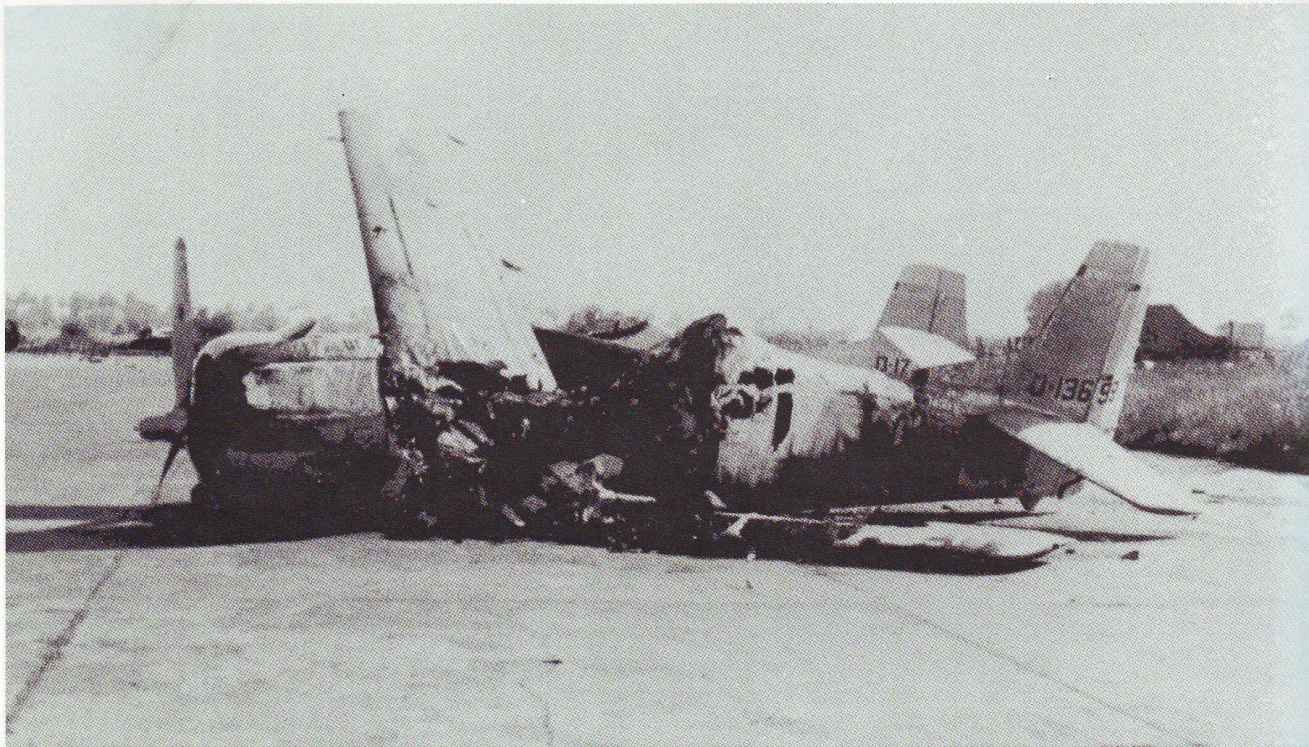
On the same day that the T-28s were over Saang, Lon Nol made his first public appeal for US military assistance. As it was, the Nixon administration in Washington had been planning a major US-South Vietnamese incursion into Cambodia to strike at communist border sanctuaries. When this was launched on April 30, the public outcry in the US was shrill. Pressured, Nixon withdrew the US element from the cross-border task force. Equally significant, strict US Congressional limitations were imposed on Nixon with regards to Cambodia, sharply curtailing the number and mandate of US military personnel assisting the Lon Nol regime.

With Congressional restrictions over their heads, the US Defense Attaché's office began assessing the AVNK. What they found, to their concern, was a force that had changed little from the one the MAAG had supported prior to 1964. The AVNK inventory, for example, was still hopelessly unfocused, maintenance was inadequate, and leadership was still ill-suited to the task.

As its ground attack component, the AVNK's 1st Intervention Group listed 13 MiG-17s, four Fouga Magister CM-170s, and (thanks to the earlier delivery of spares) six operational T-28Ds. Together these averaged 14 sorties a ▶



An AVNK An-2 destroyed at Pochentong during the January 1971 sapper attack.



Two AVNK T-28s hit during the January 1971 attack. In the foreground is T-28A 51-3699.

day. Four Cessna T-37B *Tweet* trainers, delivered in 1963 and modified for strike duties, were no longer operable. (A photograph in a 1970 Cambodian publication clearly shows a T-37 — presumably belonging to the AVNK— flying low over Route 4 southwest of Phnom Penh. This would indicate at least one T-37 was in operable condition as of that date. Later photos from 1973 show all four T-37s — still bearing old AVRK roundels — rusting on the grass at Pochentong Air Base in Phnom Penh.)

Similarly, 11 A-1Ds, delivered by France beginning in 1964, were beyond repair, the result of severe wear after having been baked in the Algerian

sun during a prior tour with the French Air Force. The USAF initially considered buying the A-1s from the AVNK and converting them to the truck-killing role with the addition of specialised avionics. Upon seeing their poor condition, the idea was quickly dropped.

For transport and liaison duties, the AVNK had 16 Douglas C-47 Skytrains, one Il-14, and two DHC L-20 Beavers. Observation missions were flown by one Cessna L-19 Bird Dog and two French Gardan GY-80 Horizon light aircraft. A helicopter group had two Sud Alouette IIIs and five Alouette IIs, only a third of which were available at any given time



The Pochentong apron after the January 1971 attack. Damaged VNAF UH-1H 732 is in the centre.



Quarters for the USAF C/AC-47 Mobile Training Team at Udorn RTAFB, 1971. (via Doug Blair)

due to lack of spares.

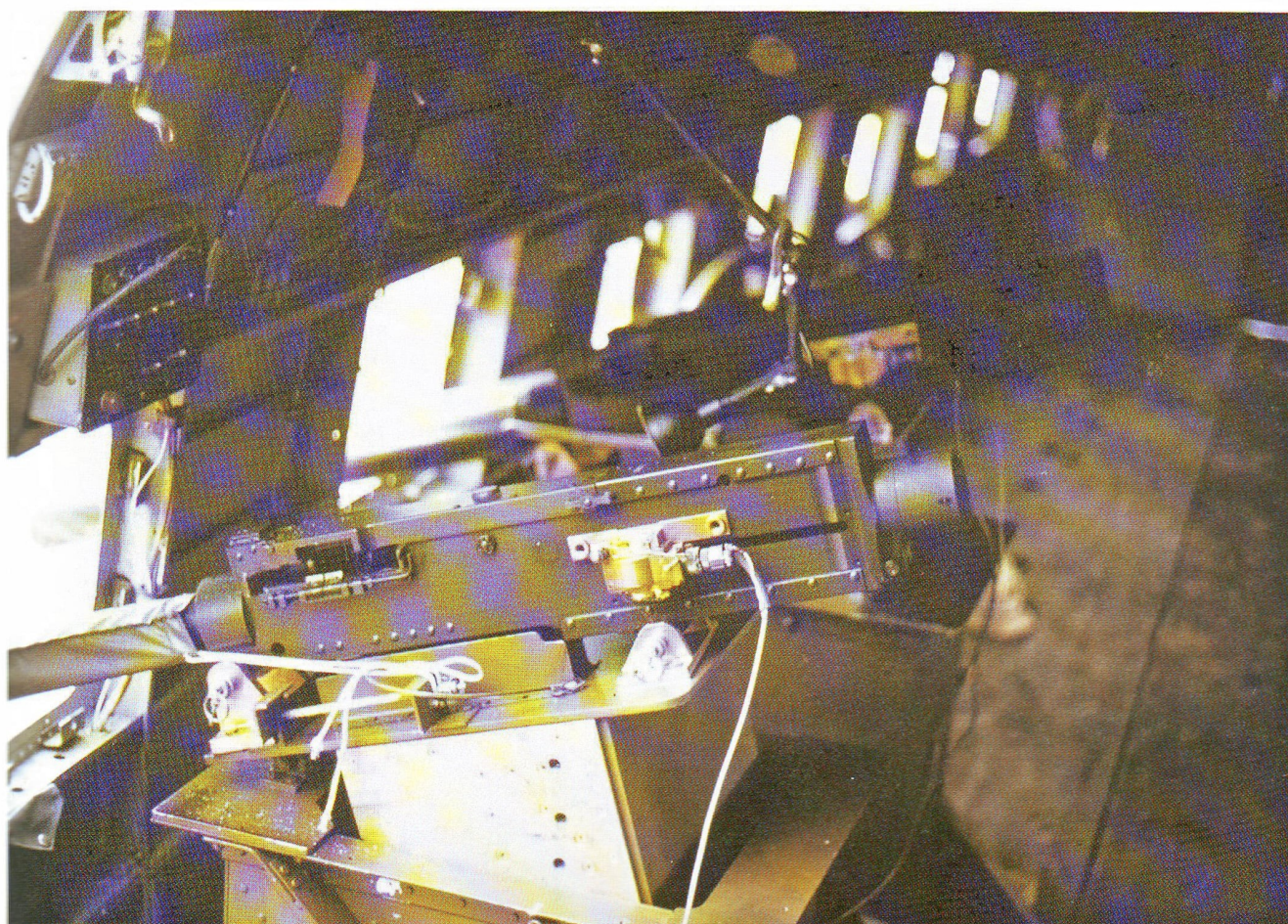
The issue of spares was especially critical for the MiG fleet. With the fall of Sihanouk, both the Soviets and Chinese had severed their military assistance programmes. Ordnance for the Cambodian MiGs, as a result, quickly dried up. To compensate, the pylons supporting the external wing tanks were adapted to hold US 500lb (226kg) bombs. In this configuration, the bombs had a negative angle to the rear, making take-offs a serious challenge. Moreover, with the added weight, these MiG bombers had a range of only 45 nautical miles (83.3km).

For the MiG's 23mm and 37mm cannons, spare parts and ordnance had

likewise become problematic. Looking to replace them with US 0.50in machine-guns, one of the *Frescos* was sent to Tan Son Nhut Air Base in South Vietnam for test firing. The modification proved a success, provided that a block of concrete was placed inside the nose so as not to change the centre of gravity. By November, the entire MiG fleet was in the process of conversion to the 0.50 system.

External Assistance

While the need for improvement in the AVNK was pressing, their burden was considerably eased by allied assistance. Thailand, for one, offered timely



Interior of a AVNK AC-47 showing one of the 0.50in machine-guns. (via Doug Blair)

help. On June 11, Royal Thai Air Force (RTAF) T-28s flying out of Ubon Royal Thai Air Force Base (RTAFB) began flying reconnaissance over the western half of the country. They also offered training for AVNK students and repair facilities for damaged AVNK aircraft. One month later, on July 2, RTAF T-28s out of Ubon flew their first Cambodian strike missions. (Only one RTAF T-28 was ever lost in Cambodia. Crashing along the banks of the Tonle Sap lake, the pilot was found executed in the cockpit.) To coordinate these sorties, three RTAF air control centres were established inside Cambodia.

The VNAF, as well, had since March been flying a heavy schedule of combat missions inside Cambodia. Some of these sorties were in support of Cambodian troops, and some in support of South Vietnamese forces which by then were conducting joint operations with Lon Nol's military. To co-ordinate missions, the VNAF established a liaison post called Direct Air Support Centre (DASC) *Zulu* at Phnom Penh's Pochentong Air Base. VNAF O-1D Bird Dogs began to regularly stage through Pochentong to help place VNAF tactical airstrikes and artillery fire.

Such assistance from the Thai and South Vietnamese was in line with the Nixon administration's doctrine of having the anti-communist nations of Southeast Asia help each other. Encouraging more of the same, the US on September 6 announced that it would loan six Bell UH-1H Iroquois helicopters, each armed with twin M-60 machine-guns, to the VNAF, which would use them exclusively in Cambodia on missions approved by DASC *Zulu* and the AVNK. The VNAF assigned a 49-man detachment to Pochentong to fly and maintain the *Hueys* until AVNK personnel were transitioned onto the UH-1H by US instructors in South Vietnam. Before the AVNK crews were ready, the choppers flew with VNAF markings.

Keeping It Simple

Vastly overshadowing the Thai and South Vietnamese assistance, extensive US tactical and strategic air power was being used to support the Lon Nol government. With much of the pressure thus taken off the AVNK, they spent the rest of the year training, expanding, and planning.

For training, the AVNK had already dispatched seven T-28 students to

Thailand. The vast majority of its student pilots, however, were handled by the AVNK Air Academy. During the royalist days, the academy had been located at Pochentong. With the fall of Sihanouk, and the sudden increase in fighting, larger facilities were needed. As a result, the school was relocated to the more tranquil environs at Battambang Air Base.

Given the need to quickly increase the number of Cambodian pilots, the school's commander, Major Norodom Vatvani, began organising a mass training class. Some 344 cadets received basic instruction at Battambang between August and November. Another six months of technical training was set to follow but, given the lack of instructor pilots, only a fraction were expected to ultimately graduate.

While more pilots trained at Battambang, the AVNK in November developed a short- and long-term expansion programme. For the near future, they identified the need for more powerful fighter aircraft, the introduction of the AC-47 gunship for close air support, and the replacement of its ageing GY-80 trainers at the academy.

For the longer term, the AVNK envisioned the establishment of three air force regions to be split among the army's six military regions. Each air force region would have a tactical air command consisting of one fighter-bomber squadron for ground support, one observation squadron, one armed helicopter squadron, and one liaison and medevac squadron. In addition, there would be a command reserve at Pochentong with an additional fighter-bomber squadron, another armed chopper squadron, one transportation group, one VIP liaison group, and one photo-recce group. Eight new air bases would be set up under the scheme.

While the AVNK was fleshing out its ambitious expansion plans, the US military had spent the summer looking for ways to develop a basic inventory of common type aircraft within the Cambodian military. Their premise was to give the AVNK the simplest, easiest to fly aircraft that they could readily maintain. Accordingly, it was decided to build the AVNK's strike component around the T-28. This was because Cambodian pilots had already been flying the T-28 for eight years, and AVNK mechanics had been fixing them for just as long. In addition, the T-28 was the mainstay for the Thai and Laotian air forces, to name but a few, and the US had plenty



Cambodian military policemen standing near the bomb crater alongside the Presidential Palace following the renegade KAF T-28 strike in November 1973