

WINGS OVER THE LAND OF A MILLION ELEPHANTS

Military Aviation in Laos 1949-1975



RLAF T-28C at Udorn RTAFB. During exceptionally heavy fighting in 1970, Lao aircraft were given permission to remain at Thai bases overnight. The slide-in 'placard' carrying the roundel can be discerned — quick change nationality! (via Albert Grandolini)

Ken Conboy

FRANCE TRANSFORMED its Indochinese protectorate of Laos into a constitutional monarchy — with sufficient autonomy to inaugurate a national assembly within six months' time — in May 1947. It was an experiment of sorts, meant to defuse calls for independence by the fledgling Lao nationalist movement, while at the same time freeing French colonial assets to combat more dangerous communist-dominated rebel forces in the neighbouring Vietnamese territories.

Continuing in the same vein, a July 1949 Franco-Lao agreement granted the Royal Lao Government (RLG) the right to raise an Armée Nationale Laotienne (ANL). While sovereign on paper, the ANL in reality operated as little more than an appendage of the French army. It was wholly supplied by the French, operated under French orders, and was led by a French cadre. Not until the opening of 1954, when it was clear that French colonialism in South East Asia was fast coming to an end, did this arrangement begin to change. Realising that the ANL was ill-suited to handle Lao defence needs, an eleventh-hour effort was made to augment the force.

As part of this, preliminary plans were formulated in May for an ANL air branch to be established with Morane-Saulnier MS.500 Criquet (French-built Fieseler Fi 156) liaison aircraft, DHC L-20 Beaver light transports, and helicopters. Nothing further, however, was done until the eve of the August 6 ceasefire, the date when the Kingdom of Laos gained true independence. On that day, the French high command noted its intention of lending the ANL some of the MS.500s (used for artillery observation) already based in Laos.

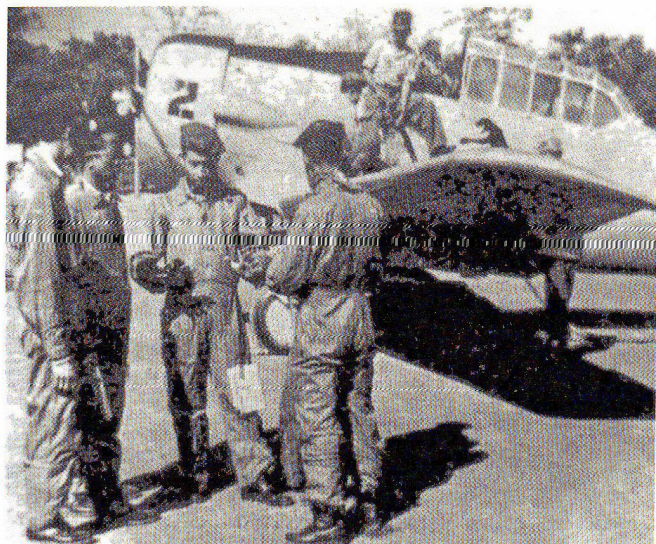
Five months of preparation followed. Finally, on January 28, 1955, the ANL's air branch — dubbed Aviation Laotienne — was officially formed.

For the time being, command was held by a French colonel, who made his headquarters in the capital, Vientiane. By the following month, ten Criquets were turned over to his charge; these, along with a 147-man French Air Force (FAF) advisory contingent, were used exclusively for training the ANL's first pilots. Instruction was conducted at two locations: Wattay airport near Vientiane, and at an airstrip on the Plain of Jars in the country's rugged northeast. Later in the year, another 22 Lao students were dispatched for courses in France and Morocco.

Despite these efforts, Aviation Laotienne could not handle even a fraction of the airlift requirements for Laos. While a small country, its harsh mountain topography and poor road system made many areas dependent on aerial resupply. To compensate, the FAF had retained four (later raised to five) Douglas C-47s in Laos. In addition, many missions were contracted to three civilian companies: Air Laos, Laos Air Transport, and the Taiwan-based Civil Air Transport (CAT). Air Laos, the national flag carrier, flew a single Boeing 307 Stratoliner, two Bristol 170s, five DH Dragon Rapide biplanes and one L-20. Laos Air Transport, which was owned by one of the most powerful Lao families, had three DC-3s and two Rapides. CAT, a proprietary of the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), initially had one DC-3, one Dragon Rapide and a device they referred to as a 'Nordwagon' available for Laos.

Another source of air support came from the Royal Thai Government (RTG). During the summer of 1955, the Royal Thai Air Force (RTAF) proposed loaning the ANL two of its Sikorsky H-19 helicopters complete with Thai crews. Sensitive to such close military-to-military contact, the RLG instead called for the *choppers* to be provided under a civilian deal with Air Laos. This was agreeable to the RTG, which dispatched the two aircraft to Wattay. These were used on ANL missions throughout the first quarter of 1956.

While this motley collection of aeroplanes and helicopters was initially involved in routine civilian charters, military missions were on the horizon. This was because earlier in 1955 peace negotiations between the RLG and a communist rebel group, the Pathet Lao, had deadlocked. Already,



RLAF T-6, circa 1961. (via Albert Grandolini)

Pathet Lao forces held control over Sam Neua province in the northeast, and were pushing into the neighbouring province of Xieng Khouang. To confront them, the government began airlifting reinforcement battalions into the area during June and July. In addition, the ANL's sole airborne battalion was parachuted into the vicinity. These missions were handled by two CAT DC-3s and the five French C-47s. (Despite the fact that all five C-47s flew with French crews, two had French markings and the remaining three sported Lao roundels. These roundels featured the *erawan*, a depiction of three elephants balanced on a pedestal — the centrepiece of the RLG flag.)

Changing the Guard

The airlift of ANL forces during the summer of 1955 would prove to be the last air operation with major French participation. The reality was, despite the fact that the FAF still had more than 100 instructors with the ANL's aviation branch, the US was fast supplanting France as the prime sponsor of the Lao military.

A greater American role had actually been on the cards since the last days of 1954, when a Programs Evaluation Office (PEO) was established within the US Embassy. Behind this ambiguous title, the PEO from the time of its inception was responsible for channelling the entire Lao defence budget. Eventually, the PEO moved beyond merely providing funds. In January 1956, the office delivered the first major pieces of US hardware — four C-47s — to the ANL.

Conversely, French influence waned. In 1957, command of Aviation Laotienne was turned over to a Lao officer, Lt Colonel Sourith Don Sasorith. Concurrently commander of the ANL's Airborne Command, Sourith owed his twin positions to the fact that his family was among the kingdom's political elite; a cousin, Katay Don Sasorith, was a former prime minister.

While losing the top slot, some 85 FAF advisors were still attached to the Aviation Laotienne as of 1959. Not only did they help instruct Lao pilots, but they also performed nearly all of the branch's administrative and maintenance tasks. This number, however, began to shrink after January, when the PEO contracted with the Manila-based Easter Construction Company for Filipino technicians to assist the ANL's air arm.

That the French were being shunted to the side was perhaps to be expected, especially since all of their C-47s and MS.500s had already been removed from the ANL's Order of Battle. In their place were six C-47s, two L-20s, and six Cessna L-19 Bird Dogs used as trainers — all of which had been delivered by the PEO. (In 1959, the PEO also delivered an Aero Commander 560 as a personal gift from President Dwight Eisenhower to the King of Laos. However, because the King's seat was not in an elevated regal position above the pilot, he rarely used the aircraft.) Together, these formed a single composite squadron with detachments in Luang Prabang, Pakse, the Plain of Jars, Seno, and Vientiane's Wattay air base. (Seno, the air base outside the town of Savannakhet, took its name from the French directions of the compass: Sud, Est, Nord and Ouest.) Plans that year called for the C-47 and L-20 sections to be eventually brought up to eight aircraft apiece. In addition, six North American T-28 Trojans — a prop trainer that had been converted into a light attack aircraft by several small air forces of the world — were tentatively programmed for delivery within the year.

Coup and Countercoup

These increases were deemed necessary because of the deteriorating security situation in the Lao countryside. In May, airborne reinforcements were once more dropped into the northeast by Lao C-47s. Two months later, paratroopers were again dropped near the Plain of Jars. Air America — the new corporate identity for CAT — was contracted to provide one Curtiss C-46 Commando and one C-47 with US and Taiwanese aircrews for this second operation.

For a time, the situation began to improve. By the spring of 1960, with an expanded US military training effort in place, analysts were guardedly optimistic. That August, however, a renegade paratroop officer, Captain Kong Le, seized Vientiane in a lightning coup d'état. Politically naive, the captain was soon co-opted by the Pathet Lao. All of the earlier government gains were erased as communist forces consolidated their hold over much of the northeast and the eastern third of the Lao 'panhandle'.

Meanwhile, most of the army leadership had been able to mass in the southern town of Savannakhet. There, with US assistance, they planned a countercoup to retake the capital. Rolling north, they were on the outskirts of Vientiane by the first week of December. After a brief but bloody stand, Kong Le and the Pathet Lao fled to new positions on the Plain of Jars by the end of the year.

During the countercoup, Aviation Laotienne had played almost no role. Indeed, their meagre inventory suffered losses when Kong Le took possession of the airframes at Wattay — amounting to two C-47s and two L-20s — and had them flown to his new base on the Plain of Jars. There they were augmented by Soviet-piloted transports and North Vietnamese helicopters which flew daily supply missions from North Vietnam.

That Kong Le had been able to regroup relatively unscathed — and that the Soviets were openly supplying his forces — got Washington's attention. More than anything, the administration of President Eisenhower wanted to interdict the Soviet air bridge. Behind closed doors, various means were discussed, including the use of Air America transports to roll makeshift gasoline bombs out the cargo doors onto the parked Russian aircraft.

A more realistic means of interdiction involved North American T-6 Texans. The T-6 had been converted into an attack aircraft by air forces in several nations, including Thailand, Cambodia, and South Vietnam. On the last day of the year, Eisenhower approved expedited delivery of the T-6s to the Lao aviation branch, with Lao pilots to be trained in gunnery and bombing techniques at Kokethiem Royal Thai Air Force Base (RTAFB) in Thailand.

That same day, the US Commander-in-Chief Pacific (CINCPAC) informed the commander of the Joint US Military Assistance Group in Thailand that the RTAF should be offered five Cessna T-37 jet trainers in exchange for the transfer of Thai-owned T-6s back to US control; these aircraft would then be given to Laos. The Thais had already been thinking along these same lines and earlier in the month proposed training Lao T-6 crews. On January 1, 1961, they informed the US that they were prepared to begin immediate training for four Lao pilot candidates. Moreover, in two day's time they would have available the first four of ten T-6s equipped with twin gunpods, rocketpods, and hardpoints for 100lb (45kg) bombs.

In Laos, meanwhile, the call went out for four pilots to attend the T-6 training. As it turned out, three Lao aviators were already proficient, having earlier attended T-6 training under French auspices in Morocco. Arriving at Kokethiem on January 3, they completed pro forma Thai instruction in five days. On January 9, they took to the cockpit of four T-6s and departed for Laos to await their first mission.



In September 1963, an RLAF T-28B, piloted by renegade Lt Chert Saibory, was flown to North Vietnam. Repainted in North Vietnamese markings, its tail number — 963 — reflects the month and year of its unexpected arrival. (via Author)



Savannakhet air base, site of Thao Ma's 1966 insurrection. (via Author)

They did not have to wait long. On January 11, T-6s from the newly-rechristened Royal Lao Air Force (RLAF) staged from Wattay on their first rocket run. Four days later, they struck again, posting a pair of truck kills. Two things quickly became evident. First, despite the fact that the Eisenhower administration had intended the T-6s to interdict the Soviet airlift, they were not being used in this role. Second, the RLAF lacked sufficient trained personnel to absorb more airframes in short order. To resolve this second problem, the RLG and RTG entered into a secret agreement whereby four Thai volunteers were dropped from the rolls of the RTAF's 63rd Squadron based at Don Muang RTAFB and incorporated into the RLAF. By the end of the first week of February, they were flying T-6 missions in Laos.

The skies of Laos, the Thai volunteers found, was growing more dangerous by the day. On January 17, the first T-6 had been shot down. A second aircraft crashed on a March 11 training run. The following day, two more aircraft — including one flown by a Thai — collided in mid-air. On March 31, a second Thai pilot crash-landed his aircraft after being riddled by 12.7mm anti-aircraft fire; he was subsequently rescued by an Air America helicopter.

Despite these early losses, the RLAF continued to fly T-6 combat missions for the next year. During this period, the US Embassy maintained a dozen air advisors in Laos, and paid for a large Filipino contingent to help maintain RLAF aircraft. While the French still retained a small military presence at Seno, their direct influence over the RLAF was all but gone.

Occasionally, the RLAF managed to score big. In April 1962, for example, four of the aircraft were deployed to Luang Prabang air base to support ongoing army operations in the kingdom's northwestern corner. During one such mission, a T-6 had a chance encounter with a Soviet-piloted Ilyushin Il-14 *Crate* transport heading for a supply drop to Pathet Lao forces. Manoeuvring behind the communist aircraft, the Lao pilot, Lt Khamphanh, salvoed his rockets. One hit the right engine, destroying the propeller and causing a nacelle fire. The Il-14 jinked wildly, streaming black smoke and losing altitude as it fought to reach the North Vietnamese border. Radio intercepts later revealed that the aircraft crashed with two killed.

While the RLAF now had its first T-6 'ace', this aircraft was already long overdue for retirement. Looking toward its replacement, the US Embassy arranged that June for a class of Lao students to be transitioned on to the T-28 at Kokethiem RTAFB. A contingent of USAF instructors were flown in for the purpose, and three spare T-28s were turned over from the South Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF). By August, the class had graduated.

Before any T-28s could be delivered, however, international politics forced the programme to be cancelled. That October, in compliance with a newly-signed tripartite peace deal between the RLG, Kong Le and the Pathet Lao, all foreign military forces were to vacate Laos. In addition, there was a moratorium set on offensive weapons systems introduced into the country. Abiding by the agreement, the US killed the T-28 programme. In addition, the T-6 pilots on loan from the RTAF were repatriated to Thailand.

While deprived of the T-28s, the RLAF benefited in other ways. Showing its compliance with the peace deal, the Soviet Union ceased its air bridge and turned over a dozen aircraft to Laos. Three Lisunov Li-2 *Cab* (licence-built DC-3) transports were handed over to the RLAF. Another three Li-2s went to Kong Le's small air branch on the Plain of Jars. Finally, three Li-2s and three Antonov An-2 *Colt* biplanes were given to the Pathet Lao.

Waterpump

Very quickly, the peace agreement unravelled. By the spring of 1963, Kong Le's forces and the Pathet Lao — once allies — were now bitter enemies.

Worse, North Vietnamese troops had made a mockery of the deal and were actively aiding the Pathet Lao in a land-grab across the northeast.

Feeling betrayed, Kong Le entered into a loose alliance with the RLG. The Royalists, in turn, looked to Washington for help. At that point, the T-28 option resurfaced. In early June, the RTAF offered to lend some of its T-28s to the RLAF for strikes against the Pathet Lao. Later that month, the administration of President John Kennedy decided that the US would directly supply these aircraft to the Lao. By the end of August, six T-28Bs were turned over. (That month, US personnel arranged for the RLAF's last remaining — and inoperative — T-6s to be airlifted to Thailand.) Each had 0.50-calibre guns, rocket pods, and hardpoints under the wings. A handful of bombs were also delivered to Savannakhet, though the US Embassy for the time refused to turn over any arming fuses.

The RLAF's new T-28 fleet saw early losses — but none due to combat. One aircraft crashed into the outskirts of Vientiane while practising aerobatics. A second airframe was lost in September under far more mysterious circumstances. That month, all of the new aircraft were set to participate in an airshow during a military review in Savannakhet. One of the more experienced pilots was named Lt Chert Saibory. A Thai national, Chert had defected from the RTAF to Wattay in late 1960 when Kong Le was still occupying the capital. When he offered his services to the rebel paratroop commander, he was flatly turned down. Fearing a jail sentence if he returned to Thailand, he remained in Vientiane as the city changed hands. Once again, Chert offered his flying services to the RLG. Desperate for manpower, the RLAF commissioned him as a lieutenant and allowed him to fly the T-6.

For the next two years, Chert proved himself an able pilot. According to one US advisor, he was the most aggressive aviator in the entire force. Despite this, he never gained the full trust of the Lao and was not promoted beyond lieutenant.

Perhaps resentful, Chert decided to defect once more. Taking to the skies during the September airshow, he headed into a cloudbank and disappeared. No official word was ever released about the fate of the aircraft or pilot. What Vientiane did not know at the time was that Chert had steered his aircraft east and gone to North Vietnam. Landing his T-28, he offered his services to the communist government in Hanoi. Not knowing what to make of the wayward Thai, they eventually placed him in prison. The aircraft remained in storage for half a year, after which it was refurbished and commissioned as the first fighter aircraft in the North Vietnamese Air Force.

Back in Laos, the remaining four T-28Bs saw infrequent action. This changed in early 1964, when skirmishes between the Pathet Lao and Kong Le escalated sharply. Washington was eager for the T-28s to answer the communist provocations. Preventing this, however, was a perceived lack of flying skills among the Lao aviators. Accordingly, the US in February began organising a special USAF detachment to train RLAF fighter pilots from bases in Thailand. Codenamed *Waterpump*, the 38-man group, commanded by Major Barney Cochran, headed to Udon RTAFB at month's end. Outfitted with four T-28Ds, *Waterpump* was declared ready to accept its first Lao students by the beginning of March.

Before the RLAF could send any candidates, the simmering conflict in Laos erupted into a full-blown war. On May 13, fighting peaked with a Pathet Lao blitz across the Plain of Jars. In reaction, US Ambassador Leonard Unger four days later belatedly granted approval for the Embassy's stockpile of fuses to be turned over to RLAF control. Later that morning, the Lao launched its first T-28 bombing runs over the Plain of Jars.

That same day, Ambassador Unger urged more airframes be given to the Lao air force. Washington agreed, ordering Major Cochran to turn over his four *Waterpump* T-28Ds to the RLAF. Hastily applying Lao roundels, the aircraft arrived the following afternoon, along with a dozen 500lb (227kg) bombs and five *Waterpump* technicians to help with loading.

While a welcome addition, the four new aircraft were not considered enough. Two days later, CINCPAC told Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) to transfer five T-28s and five recce-configured RT-28s from the VNAF to *Waterpump*. All ten aircraft had become surplus that month after the VNAF phased out the T-28 in favour of the larger Douglas A-1 Skyraider. Arriving the next day, four of the aircraft were retained by *Waterpump* (to replace the ones handed over to the RLAF), and the remaining six went to Laos.

Fireflies and the A-Team

Just as had happened during the earlier influx of T-6s in 1961, the RLAF suddenly had more aircraft than it had able fighter pilots. Noting this, Ambassador Unger called for US volunteers — deemed more skilled and aggressive — to man some of the aircraft. After the Lao Prime Minister approved the scheme on May 17, Washington added its consent

three days later. Immediately, six Air America pilots (later reduced to five) were sent to Udorn for T-28 certification by *Waterpump*. All being former fighter pilots — one with the USAF, the rest with the US Marine Corps — they were declared ready later that day. On May 25, the Air America contingent, dubbed the *A-Team*, was put to the test. Five aircraft took to the sky and headed toward a key bridge off the eastern edge of the Plain of Jars. Racing over the structures they salvoed their bombs — and missed the target entirely. Worse, when the contingent returned to Wattay, two of the aircraft were found to have bullet scars on them.

Mindful of the diplomatic embarrassment that would arise should an American-piloted T-28 be downed, Ambassador Unger was reluctant about using them again. (Over the ensuing years, Air America pilots continued to fly T-28s under special circumstances, such as search-and-rescue operations. This programme was finally dropped in 1967.) Already, an alternative was in the works. Just like three years earlier, the RTAF had already agreed to provide a contingent of Thai volunteers. Codenamed the *Firefly* project, the first group of five Thai pilots arrived on May 27 at Udorn. Dropped from RTAF rosters for six months, they were certified by the *Waterpump* instructors by the end of the month.

On the morning of June 1, the five Thais flew to Vientiane. Accompanying them were two *Waterpump* advisors, who established a makeshift Air Operations Center (AOC) at Wattay. Four of the five Thais boarded T-28s and departed for the Plain of Jars. Two truck kills later, they returned from a successful baptism of fire.

From this auspicious start, the *Firefly* programme became an important element in the government's arsenal. Quickly, a division of labour was established. Whereas the RLAf concentrated its attention in southern Laos (the RLAf headquarters had shifted to Savannakhet in mid-1961), the *Fireflies* handled all T-28 operations over northern battlefields. While the RLAf answered to a Lao chain-of-command, the *Fireflies* were controlled exclusively by the US-manned AOC, which took its targeting orders from the US Embassy.

In short order, the *Fireflies* suffered losses. On August 14, a Thai-piloted RT-28 was shot down by 37mm fire. Four days later, the senior RTAF liaison to the programme, Lt Colonel Tavashi Viriyapong, was downed while making a fact-finding tour of the battlefield. That same day, another Thai-piloted T-28 strayed over the North Vietnamese border and was shot from the sky.

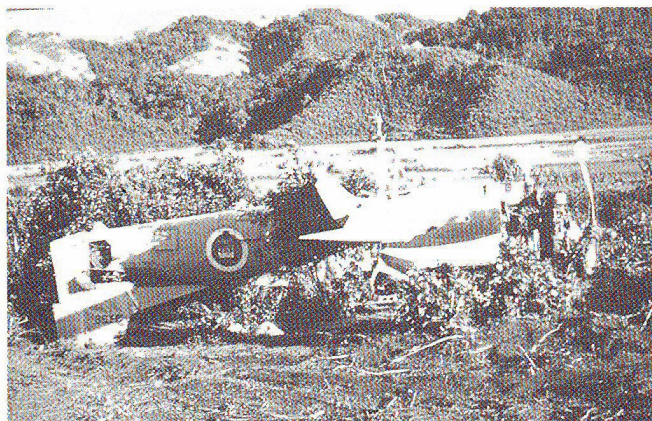
War over the Trail

The northeastern section of the kingdom was not the only battlefield in Laos. In late August 1964, the US began to contemplate air strikes in southern Laos along the so-called Ho Chi Minh Trail. Actually an interlocking series of footpaths and dirt roads, the trail was the primary logistical corridor through the Lao 'panhandle' that linked North Vietnam to the fast-expanding war in South Vietnam. While Washington wanted the trail to be cut, election considerations made it necessary for the first strikes to be conducted by the RLAf.

In late September, Ambassador Unger presented the RLAf commander and the Lao Prime Minister with a list of trail targets to be hit by Lao T-28s. Both offered their consent to the plan. Accordingly, on the morning of October 14, three RLAf flights left Savannakhet for targets near the Mu



A USAF major prepares to board a T-28 at Wattay, July 1966. By that time, members of the US Air Attache's office had received permission to fly weather reconnaissance missions over northern Laos. During such sorties, they used the same T-28s allocated to the Fireflies, the only difference being placards with miniature USAF markings put on the sides of the fuselage.



A Lao-marked T-28 wreck at the end of the Nakhang runway, 1965. At the controls was an Air America pilot who had been participating in a search-and-rescue operation over northeastern Laos; he emerged unscathed. (via Author)

Gia pass along the eastern Lao border.

After the T-28s returned, US reconnaissance jets flew post-strike analysis sorties. As they crossed the region, communist gunners fired back. Using this as a pretext, the administration of President Lyndon Johnson in early December approved retaliatory strikes from US aircraft to suppress anti-aircraft fire. With the consent of the Lao Government, the first US armed sweep was conducted on December 14. From that moment on, though the RLAf continued to periodically bomb the trail over the ensuing years, US air power would dominate aerial interdiction along the Lao panhandle.

Fits and Starts, and More Fits

The year 1965 opened with a bang. A few weeks after the New Year, an electric circuit on a T-28 gunpod at Wattay shorted out: the gun began to fire, sparking an explosion. The chain reaction destroyed most of the RLAf on the ground.

The destroyed aircraft were soon replaced from US stocks. There was a difference, however. From that point forward, a fixed amount of T-28s were now set aside specifically for use by the *Fireflies*. Shuttling between Udorn and Wattay, these aircraft were not counted in the official RLAf inventory. Some of them were equipped with guide rails on the side of the fuselage which could accept placards with RLAf roundels. Increasingly, however, the Thai-piloted aircraft flew without any national insignia.

The Thais needed their own aircraft because the *Firefly* programme was fast expanding. By the spring of 1966, some 23 Thais were being contracted for six-month tours. During that time, they were required to fly at least 100 combat sorties. With these quotas over their heads, the Thais, when compared with the RLAf, flew more missions with fewer aircraft. In March, for example, the *Fireflies* flew an average nine aircraft a day, chalking up 289 sorties for the month. By comparison, the RLAf, with some 20 T-28s at its disposal, recorded just 172 missions.

Not only were the *Fireflies* more active, but they were more accurate. This was because they were required to use either Forward Air Control (FAC) spotter aircraft or locals in the backseat of the lead fighter in order to direct their strikes. (Until the spring of 1966, the FAC aircraft were civilian aircraft — often belonging to Air America — which flew under contract with the US Embassy. In October 1966, the USAF began providing O-1s — the L-19 redesignated — for this purpose. While bearing RLAf markings, these O-1s flew with American pilots who went by the callsign *Raven*.) The RLAf, draping itself in a blanket of patriotism, refused foreign advice and insisted on using grid co-ordinates based on outdated intelligence.

The RLAf had other problems, chief among them its flamboyant commander, Thao Ma. Of mixed Lao-Vietnamese heritage, Ma had entered the ANL prior to independence. Impressing the French enough to earn a slot at the ANL Officer's Academy, he entered the army's airborne battalion upon graduation. Remaining with the paratroopers until 1957, he then volunteered for the aviation branch. After checking out in the L-19 at Wattay, he was sent for T-6 training in Morocco, then twin-engine instruction in France.

Returning to Laos in May 1960, Captain Ma initially flew transports. Because of his prior T-6 experience — and his loyalty to counter-coup leaders then massing at Savannakhet — he was rewarded that December by being selected to lead the four-man group headed for T-6 gunnery instruction at Kokethiem. Upon his return in January 1961, the newly-promoted Major Ma was named the first commander of the new RLAf.

Almost immediately, he became problematic. During the first week of February, for example, he threatened a coup if the army carried out plans to move the RLAf headquarters from Wattay to Savannakhet, apparently out of concern that the air forces would become too far removed from the centre of power (the headquarters did move to Savannakhet by mid-year).

Later that year, after yet another promotion, Ma refused to co-operate with his US advisors, openly professing his wish that all foreigners — North Vietnamese as well as Americans — depart Laos. He was also decidedly unaggressive, rebuffing US suggestions for him to use his T-6 fleet against communist targets in the Lao 'panhandle'.

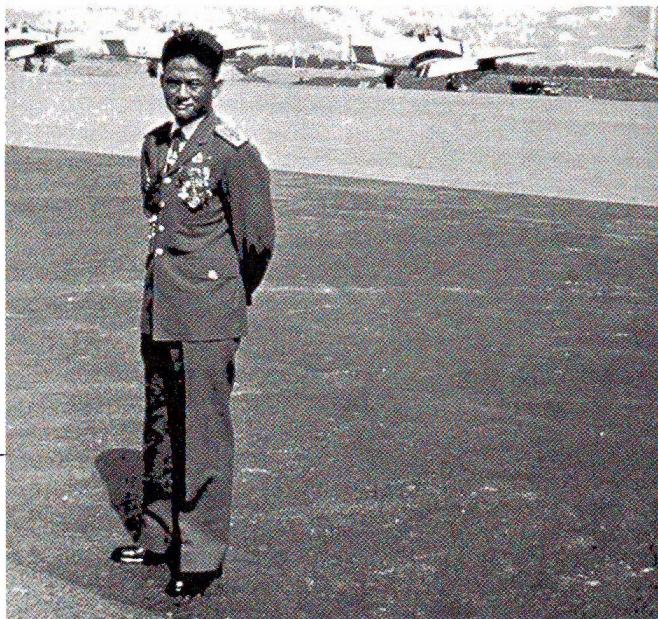
By 1963, however, Colonel Ma had undergone a complete transformation in character and political outlook. By the time the US delivered the first T-28s that August, Ma was fiercely pro-US and a tiger in the cockpit. Promoted to brigadier general in January 1964, he pioneered the first air strikes against the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

While proficient over the battlefield, Ma was ill-suited for skirmishes in the cut-throat world of Lao military politics. Sympathetic to fellow southern officers, he fell out of favour with the more powerful crowd of northern generals — all of whom began to plot against the aviator. On July 3, 1965, as he was leaving a party at the US Air Attaché's Vientiane home, the Jeep in front of him exploded after hitting a mine. When Ma blamed army rivals, most US officials agreed.

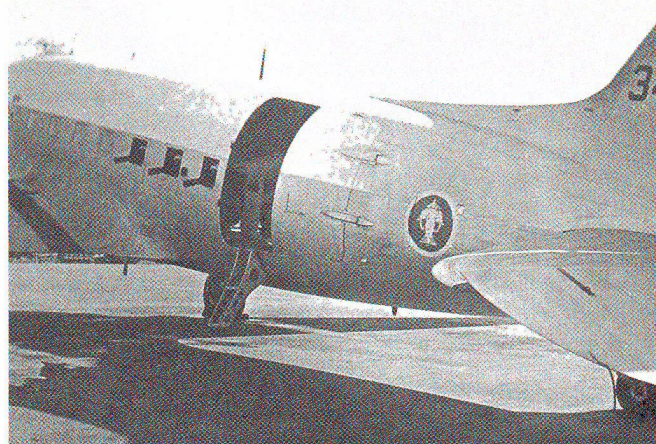
Relations further deteriorated in late 1965 when the General Staff ordered Ma to transfer three newly-delivered C-47s from Savannakhet to Wattay. Knowing they would be used to haul contraband, Ma refused. The generals struck back by limiting the next batch of RLAf promotions — which Ma doled out to keep the loyalty of his pilots — to just one captain and one lieutenant.

In early May 1966, the army hit again — this time paying off the RLAf chief-of-staff to stage a mutiny with several T-28 pilots. As the internal insurrection kicked off, Ma secluded himself in Savannakhet, refusing orders from the General Staff to come to Vientiane. Following this rebuff, the generals loudly charged the RLAf commander with insubordination. To ease tensions, Ma was visited on May 12 by US Ambassador William Sullivan, the finance minister, and the army commander. By then, the General Staff was insisting that the RLAf move its headquarters to Vientiane and Ma turn over control to the chief-of-staff. Backed into a corner, Ma reluctantly agreed to turn over temporary command to his disloyal chief-of-staff effective from June 5. He also agreed to shift some personnel to Wattay by the end of the month.

Despite these concessions, Ma was far from finished. That night, he began secretly plotting with several key southern officers. For five consecutive nights, they drafted plans for a show of force against Vientiane. According to their scheme, Ma would stage a rebellion at Savannakhet air base on June 4, one day before he was to relinquish command. As it was, the impatient Ma launched two days early. While one infantry regiment ringed the airfield in a show of support, the other conspirators remained silent. Losing



General Thao Ma, RLAf commander, poses at Wattay in 1966.
(via Author)



The first RLAf AC-47 arrives in September 1969. This aircraft, along with all subsequent gunships, was repainted in the standard USAF camouflage scheme. (via Author)

momentum, the insurrection fizzled out within 48 hours.

Following this, Vientiane was livid. The US Embassy was irritated, too. Without support, Ma agreed to divide the RLAf. Accordingly, he would be reduced to Tactical Air Force commander with the T-28s, while General Sourith, the pre-1961 aviation commander, would take over as chief of the new Military Airlift Command. To further restrain Ma, Vientiane insisted that he leave his Savannakhet powerbase and temporarily go to Luang Prabang. Agreeing to this, he took a dozen T-28s and 30 of his most loyal pilots. From there, they began flying combat in the north, while the *Fireflies* handled sorties over the northeast.

Despite this rebuke, it was not long before Ma was plotting again with his fellow southerners. Their scheming took on a new sense of urgency in early October when the General Staff announced plans to further dilute Ma's position by making him commander of a proposed Combined Operations Centre — a Vientiane desk job that would deprive him of the T-28s.

Seeking a forceful response to this latest announced demotion, Ma and his co-conspirators found a window of opportunity during the third week of October. During that time, the army commander was set to spend the night in Savannakhet during a southern fact-finding tour. According to Ma's plans, his cohorts would kidnap the commander. Meantime, his loyal pilots would strike military targets around Vientiane. After that, a rebel infantry regiment would be airlifted from Savannakhet to the capital.

At dawn on October 21, Ma began his portion of the coup. Eight T-28s staged from Savannakhet toward Vientiane. At 0830 hours, they began dive-bombing the capital. Two ammunition depots were hit, as well as the army's regional headquarters and the General Staff building. Some 36 soldiers were killed and another 25 wounded.

As the strikes were taking place, Ma took to the radio from Savannakhet and announced that the army commander was in custody. However, this was not true. At the last minute, the others had backed out of the coup. Alone, Ma readied a second flight of T-28s to depart for the capital. Before they could leave, Ambassador Sullivan and his British counterpart flew to Savannakhet and counselled the rebel aviator against another attack. Reluctantly, Ma, 12 pilots, and several dozen RLAf technicians boarded a dozen T-28s and a C-47 and set off for Udon. Taken into custody by Thai officials, they were kept in prison for eight months before being granted political asylum.

Painful Recovery

Back in Laos, the RLAf was never the same again. Once more appointed commander of air assets, General Sourith proved to be as lacklustre as ever. His headquarters was shifted to Wattay, from where his fellow generals were able to misuse RLAf transports by smuggling gold, opium, and paying passengers. So blatant was the abuse that Ambassador Sullivan in 1968 refused to supply five more C-47s already in the pipeline for delivery.

The RLAf T-28s were having trouble, too. After the Thao Ma coup, the *Fireflies* had resumed responsibility for air support throughout northern Laos. In late 1967, however, one of their aircraft accidentally struck a government outpost that was under attack. Following this, the army refused further close air support from the Thais. To compensate, the RLAf scrounged seven T-28s from southern Laos and deployed them to Luang Prabang. To assist, US advisors were assigned to an AOC at that air base. However, the Lao fighter pilots insisted on striking target boxes instead

of pin-pointed targets. As the USAF AOC commander looked on in frustration, the RLAf's standard morning order amounted to little more than "All T-28s go [north], all day."

That June, USAF Colonel Robert Tyrrell was reassigned to Laos as Air Attaché after a three-year break. To his dismay, he found T-28 sorties to be at their lowest monthly rates in four years. Worse, the Lao aircraft were being written off at a rapid pace. In Luang Prabang, for example, a total of 17 T-28s had been destroyed on the ground during North Vietnamese commando attacks over the previous year.

Not all the news was bad. One of the few bright spots was afforded by a new programme to train Hmong T-28 aviators. A hill tribe minority, the Hmong were a fiercely independent tribe favoured by the CIA as guerrilla warriors. In an effort to boost morale, one senior CIA official in 1966 arranged for a handful of Hmong to receive light aircraft training in Thailand. Three small contingents had passed this course by the summer of 1967. However, when the CIA attempted to send them to T-28 training under *Waterpump* auspices, the generals in Vientiane balked. Only after some firm lobbying did they eventually give permission for two Hmong to be commissioned into the RLAf and sent to Udom.

Given their earlier experiences in light aircraft, the two Hmong impressed their *Waterpump* instructors. In January 1968, both graduated near the top of their class. Within weeks, however, one of the two pilots entered a cloudbank and slammed into a mountain top. Alone, the remaining Hmong aviator, Captam Ly Lu, quickly became a legend. Fearless in combat, he chalked up nearly 1,000 missions in 18 months, sometimes flying a dozen missions a day. Though eventually shot down and killed in July 1969, his successful precedent convinced Vientiane to allow a steady stream of Hmong for *Waterpump* training.

Coming of Age

Hmong pilots aside, the RLAf was consistently failing to show gains commensurate with the huge infusion of US assistance it received. There were many reasons for this. For one thing, morale among the T-28 contingent was exceedingly low. "A T-28 pilot was lucky if he lived two years", said one USAF advisor. "I never knew a T-28 pilot who lived three years if he continued to fly fighters." Indeed, after five years of *Waterpump* classes, the net total of T-28 pilots had barely increased. And although T-28s had showed some sortie gains — 522 were flown in December 1968, an 18-month high and nearly triple the January figure — the increase was a result of excessive US advisory assistance.

The last point was proving to be the RLAf's undoing. In mid-1968, the USAF detachment at each AOC (five AOCs were in operation, one for each military region) increased to ten men, putting Americans in charge of nearly all support functions and thus depriving RT personnel of the luxury of making mistakes from which they could learn to operate on their own. (USAF personnel assigned to the AOCs were ostensibly attached to the Air Attaché's office. By December 1969, some 140 officers and enlisted men were under the attaché, the vast majority of them assigned to the AOCs. Added to this number were ten USAF armament specialists who flew from Udom to Wattay every morning to help load bombs on *Firefly* T-28s.) Added to this was the fact that the Thais were still flying most T-28 operations in the northeast, and USAF spotter aircraft were performing FAC duties in all parts of the kingdom.

Such a high degree of assistance clearly could not be perpetuated, especially given Washington's declared policy of gradually withdrawing its military from South East Asia. Ambassador Sullivan, in particular, was eager to put in place a more responsive and efficient RLAf. As early as September 1968, he had pushed the Air Attaché to begin conceptualising a centralised command centre to co-ordinate RLG air and ground operations.

Slowly, Sullivan's idea grew. By the autumn of 1969, USAF Lt Colonel William Keeler, who had recently completed work in Bangkok on a Combined Operations Centre (COC), was assigned with making a similar system in Laos. The result was plans for a Lao Military Tactical Control System that would encompass five Joint Operations Centres (JOCs) at the regional level and one COC in Vientiane. The COC, headed by the commander of the armed forces, theoretically exercised control over all RLG military assets, though he normally delegated this responsibility to the regional commanders. In addition, the COC would be notified of all RLAf sorties before they were flown and have the power to move airlift assets from one military region to another.

Aside from these last two functions — the mandatory reporting of RLAf sorties and tighter control over transport aircraft — little was set to change under the proposed COC system. Still, many quarters offered strong protest. The French, for example, thought it would erase what little

influence they wielded. The US Army Attaché and elements of CIA, too, were against the plan because they thought it was a ploy by the USAF to grab more control. And the Lao ground forces were wary of any concept to give the RLAf more power.

Despite such opposition, the plan was pushed through. Much credit went to the two Lao officers who spearheaded efforts to win approval: Prince Mangkra Souvanna Phouma, a French-trained RLAf major, and Bouathong Phothivongsa, an army lieutenant colonel recently returned from a stint at the French War College. Significantly, Major Mangkra was the son of the prime minister, which greatly aided his lobbying effort.

By February 1970, every military region commander had given his approval to the COC scheme. The following month, an official dedication ceremony was held. The armed forces commander-in-chief opened the proceedings:

The COC will function as my voice and will be the vehicle with which I will communicate with all military forces of our country concerning tactical military matters...

Despite such stated importance, the COC was physically sited at an uninspiring two-floor wooden annex outside the General Staff building. There, regular updates were supposed to flow in from the regional JOCs. In part, this translated into reality, with some JOCs maintaining contact some of the time. At the national level, however, the COC never expanded beyond a passive reporting facility for aircraft deployment.

Besides work on the COC, other programmes were speeding the RLAf towards self-sufficiency. Between April and September 1969, for example, the USAF qualified the first two RLAf officers as FACs. That August, a 21-man USAF detachment, codenamed *Combat Wombat*, was dispatched to Udom to restart C-47 training, which the Lao itself had been trying with marginal success at Savannakhet since early 1965.

Effort was also given to forming an effective RLAf helicopter section. Helicopters had long been in the Lao inventory, the first being a pair of Sud Alouettes donated by the French in 1960. These were dropped from the RLAf inventory by 1963. The following year, the US turned over a single Sikorsky H-34, for which there were three qualified Lao pilots. To train additional crews, a US Marine Corps instructor team operated from Udom until late 1966. Beginning in 1967, they were replaced by a US Army detachment.

While the number of H-34s slowly grew, the RLAf remained reticent about using them in combat. Much of their reluctance was due to the fact that Air America and the USAF provided generous *chopper* support, removing pressure on the Lao to do it itself. In fact, not until early 1969, after heavy coaxing from the US Air Attaché, did RLAf H-34s significantly contribute to an air mobile operation.

Coaxing, too, was needed in the T-28 programme. This became particularly important after the *Firefly* programme was terminated in September 1970. Various methods were used in an attempt to squeeze better results from the Lao fighter pilots. Some of the programmes fell flat. For example, the Air Attaché's Office tried starting a per diem fund for the RLAf by collecting spent brass bullet casings and selling them. The Lao, however, had long been doing this itself and, in protest, cut the number of sorties it was flying. As a result, the attaché was forced to cease collecting the casings and instead turn to the CIA, which agreed to use its own funds to provide an extra \$1 per mission flown (a substantial increase in pay given the RLAf's low base salaries).

A second programme was more successful. This involved a Survival Training



A T-28 at Long Tieng airbase prepares to depart on a bombing run, early 1970s. On many occasions, the battlefield was no further than the far side of the ridge visible in the background. (via Author)

Course established at Hua Hin, Thailand. Groups of T-28 pilots were sent there, ostensibly to enhance their escape-and-evasion skills. Hua Hin served an added, more important purpose. According to one US advisor, "The course was actually an excuse to give RLAF pilots a much deserved rest on a Thai beach."

Enter the Gunship

Perhaps the biggest development during this period was the introduction of the AC-47 *Spooky* gunship. The AC-47 dated back to late 1964, when it was introduced by the USAF to South Vietnam. Armed with three side-firing 7.62mm miniguns, these USAF aircraft had been flying in support of the RLG since early 1969. By mid-1969, as part of the US drawdown from South East Asia, the RLAF was slated to take several of the ex-USAF ships. The first three arrived at Wattay on September 5, 1969 and were used that same night on a pre-selected target near the capital. Immediately, a wealth of problems became evident — as one US advisor remembers:

The first three aircraft arrived in bad shape, with holes and broken instruments. We got them airborne, then found out that the Lao didn't understand the gunship concept: instead of banking the aircraft and, in effect, letting the pilot ride the bullets into the target, the gunners in the rear were trying to move the entire mounting while firing continuous bursts to sight targets. Very quickly they burned out the guns.

Guns were not the only problems with the AC-47. (To help alleviate gun problems, the AC-47 miniguns were fired at 3,000 instead of the normal 6,000 rounds per minute.) For one thing, the RLAF had no experience with night flying. For another thing, the RLAF had no separate AC-47 pilot roster. This meant that all gunship crews were pulling additional duty as transport pilots in the day. Moreover, just as the T-28 pilots had discovered, there was a market for spent brass casings — something the AC-47 produced in abundance. On more than one occasion, the gunship crews circled just beyond Vientiane and expended all their ammunition in order to get the brass!

With a slow start, then, the RLAF gunships took to the skies. By January 1970, however, improvement was clearly evident. With a monthly sortie rate initially set at 30 missions per month, this had increased to 50 by early spring. Much of this was due to the exceptional quality of the Lao pilots. Among the oldest and most experienced in the RLAF, many had over 7,000 flying hours.

Last Legs

By late 1972, history was set to repeat itself. Just as the French had tried to augment the ANL at the eleventh-hour in 1954, the US, facing an imminent ceasefire, was now trying to bolster the RLAF with one eye on the clock. As part of this, in January 1973, Air America turned over ten Fairchild C-123K Providers — with pilot and maintenance training set to begin by spring. Preparations were also made for H-34 training to be shifted from Udorn to Savannakhet.

In the end, all of these attempts came too late. By the time the ceasefire went into effect on February 22, the 2,200-strong RLAF was ill-prepared to handle the RLG's military aviation requirements.

Worse for the RLAF, General Thao Ma, in Thai exile since 1966, decided to reappear on the scene. His return to Laos was prompted by the steady encroachment of Pathet Lao forces across the country. The ceasefire, as it turned out, was being manipulated by the communists to their political and military advantage. By the summer of 1973, many Royalist generals were panicking. Rumours began to fly that a coup was in the air, and Thao Ma's name started to surface with regularity.

Despite this, when Ma crossed the Mekong by boat at 0500 hours on August 20, he achieved total surprise. Accompanied by 60 followers, including six pilots, he seized Wattay without difficulty. Reaching into bags filled with blue and white armbands and shoulder patches, they began handing them out to airport personnel. After that, Ma and his six pilots boarded T-28s and took to the sky. Fulfilling a personal vendetta against key officers on the General Staff, he started to dive-bomb the regional military headquarters.

Fighting back, the army generals sent a task force towards Wattay. For a time, confusion reigned. To help diffuse the situation, the US Air Attaché drove to the house of the RLAF commander, Major General Sourith. There he found the commander with a rebel armband. Despite pleas from the attaché, the general insisted on remaining at home.

Back at Wattay, a truck-mounted machine-gun managed to strike Thao Ma's T-28. Streaming smoke, it crashed on the runway. Ma was dragged alive from the wreck and loaded in the back of a truck. He was summarily executed later that morning. With the downing of Ma's aircraft, the

coup attempt soon fizzled. Even before this, plans were under way to significantly downsize the RLAF. This was due to two reasons. First, the US Government was looking to slash the funds appropriated for the Lao military. Second, the ceasefire had theoretically brought peace to Laos, negating the need for a large air force.

In line with this reasoning, the US Embassy in March 1973 had drawn up plans for a reduction in the number of RLAF aircraft and a lowered overall sortie rate of no more than 2,000 flights per month. Accordingly, the T-28 fleet, which numbered 56 at the time of the ceasefire, was to be reduced to 40, with the extra aircraft given to the Philippines. (Over the previous years, the number of T-28s available for Laos fluctuated greatly. As of 1969, an average 75 T-28s were available, which included the aircraft used by *Waterpump*, the *Fireflies*, and RLAF. As of mid-1970, with the *Firefly* programme set to be cancelled, the RLAF counted 44 fighters, plus another five under *Waterpump* control.) Meanwhile, the AC-47s were reduced from eight down to six aircraft, with the miniguns removed and placed in storage at Savannakhet.

To lower training costs, all undergraduate pilot training had shifted by April 1 from Udorn to the Air Training Command (ATC) at Savannakhet. *Waterpump*, retained at Udorn for more advanced training, was renamed the Training and Liaison Detachment.

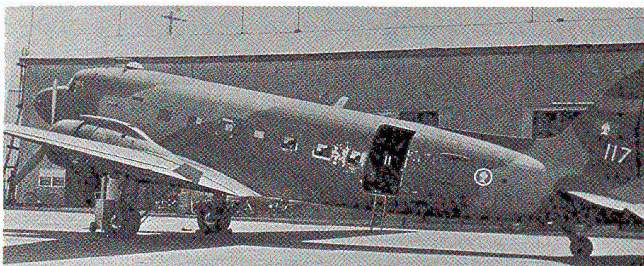
While smaller, the RLAF on paper remained a viable force. Just as had been the case since 1968, it was divided into composite wings, with each respective base commander in control of all aircraft at his locale — prior to 1968, each aircraft type came under a separate command. (The 101st Wing was located at Luang Prabang, the 202nd Wing at Wattay, the 303rd Wing at Savannakhet, and the 404th Wing at Pakse. The large detachment at Long Tieng was not given a number.) Besides the reduced number of T-28s and AC-47s, the RLAF's inventory included ten C-123s, ten Cessna T-41 Mescaleros, 11 C-47s, 15 O-1F FAC aircraft, and 32 H-34s. (Two of the C-47s were provided by Australia.) Of these, the ATC was allotted six T-28s, one C-47, four H-34s, and five T-41s.

Behind the scenes, the RLAF's already limited capabilities were eroding at a fast pace. Because of fuel rationing, Lao aviators rarely flew. By early 1975, T-28 pilots were in the air only two hours a month. Exacerbating matters was the fact that the Prime Minister, sensing an eventual communist victory, kept the air force on a tight leash despite open communist violations of the peace agreement.

The Prime Minister had reason for pessimism. By the spring of 1975, the vast bulk of the countryside belonged to the Pathet Lao. On April 14, communist forces seized a key road junction north of the capital. Having called the RLG's bluff for months, the Pathet Lao did so with little fear of a counter-attack. This time, however, it was wrong. Without waiting to consult the Prime Minister, the RLG Defence Minister ordered nine T-28s to strafe and bomb the Pathet Lao column.

This proved to be the RLAF's last offensive operation. Hearing of the strike, the Prime Minister publicly berated his subordinate. This effectively grounded the air force, which, along with the rest of the Royalist military, watched with concern as neighbouring Cambodia fell on April 17 to communist forces. Thirteen days later, South Vietnam succumbed to similar pressure.

While Laos was not far behind, the end would be different. Unlike the brutal final offensives against Phnom Penh and Saigon, Vientiane was being swallowed by slow but steady Pathet Lao encroachment. Realising the end was near, RLAF transports spent the first two weeks of May whisking passengers across the Mekong to the safety of Thailand. Finally, on May 17, communist sympathisers within the RLAF staged a protest at Wattay. Taking the hint, General Bouathong, the same officer who had helped create the COC and had been promoted to air force commander the previous year, crossed the Mekong. By month's end, the RLAF had effectively ceased to exist.



RLAF AC-47 with the miniguns removed and placed in storage, circa 1974. (via Author)