

COVEY's in Southeast Asia

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INTRODUCTION

This is a loose chronology of events that led up to hostilities in Southeast Asia ... often referred to as the VietNam War. It is not intended to be a comprehensive history of that war, or even of USAF involvement. All materials included were obtained from verifiable sources. The chronology is, by design, limited in scope and depth to events that had a profound effect or set the ground rules, which affected Covey operations and mission capabilities.

The chronology provides a brief review of events leading up to open hostilities, and some insight in the diplomatic and political considerations that governed USAF's involvement in this very politicized war. Also included is the evolution of the command structure to accommodate the military scenario and the emergence of the Coveys.

What is not included is actuarial data, which would further emphasize the impressive involvement and varied activities of the Coveys; these can be reviewed in other official records, cited where possible. However, by reading the personal narratives documenting the combat experiences of the individual Coveys, one is presented with a summary of insights providing further testimony to the disciplined professionalism of Covey FACs in a much more eloquent and impressive manner than that of mission numbers and other operational data.

THE BEGINNING

The war in Southeast Asia can be traced back to the Vietnamese national movement that became active after WWI. Their goal was to end French colonial rule in Indochina. Their struggle for independence for the last 80 years evolved into two distinct phases. Phase 1, from 1920 until 1950, focused on Nationalism vs Colonialism. Phase 2, from 1950 until the fall of Saigon, focused on Nationalist Communism vs anti-Communism.

Following the German conquest of France during WWII, Japan, an Axis ally, entered Indochina intending to absorb the French Asian Colonies into its empire. Towards the end of WWII, U.S. agents were parachuted into Vietnam and made contact with the local insurgent forces. The insurgents were a collection of communist and non-communist elements all with the same commitment ... an independent Vietnam. The insurgents were known as the Viet Minh ... their leader was Ho Chi Minh.

Immediately following the Japanese surrender ending WWII, President Truman issued General Order 1, which outlined procedures for disarming Japanese forces in the Far East. In that order, the 16th parallel was chosen as a demarcation line between zones of control in Indochina. The Chinese National troops would disarm the Japanese north of that line; south of the line British were to disarm the Japanese.

On 9 Sep 45, 200,000 Chinese Nationalist troops arrived in Hanoi to disarm the Japanese. Upon arrival, they found that Viet Minh had taken control of the northern region. On 2 Sep 45, Ho Chin Minh issued a Declaration of Independence establishing The Democratic Republic of Vietnam. The new government had replaced all French road signs with Vietnamese ones as evidence of intent to exercise sovereignty over the territory.

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The British, aided by a small contingent of French soldiers, completed disarming the Japanese in the south. On 23 Sept, the French with British assistance, re-assumed control of Saigon. Negotiations soon began with the Chinese Nationalists to permit French military forces to move into the northern part of Vietnam.

Through the rest of the decade, intense negotiations were initiated between France and the Viet Minh representatives to resolve the issue of the French presence in Indochina. These negotiations repeatedly broke down over the issue of Vietnamese independence. Heightened tensions were aggravated by the growing support of Viet Minh independence by the USSR and the new Peoples Republic of China, who as a show of support amassed troops on the border with NVM. During this same time, guerilla warfare was becoming more prevalent in the south. Soon, Viet Minh forces under the command of Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, launched a series of attacks on French military posts and truck convoys, inflicting heavy casualties and provoking general hostilities.

This period ended Phase 1, as the division between communist and anti-communist began to emerge.

AMERICAN CONCERN OVER SEA

The United States considered it essential to support France's attempt to reassert its historic role in Indochina. As a result, the United States accepted a French proposal to give limited autonomy to The Associated States of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Emperor Bao Dai also supported this proposal. The United States recognized the Government of South Vietnam headed by Bao Dai (no longer Emperor) on 3 Feb 50. On 16 Feb, France formally requested American military and economic assistance for the war now raging in Indochina. The request prompted the Truman administration to re-evaluate the situation in Southeast Asia. Accordingly, they issued the following statement:

the threat of Communist aggression in Indochina is only one phase of anticipated Communist plans to seize all of Southeast Asia.

In National Security Council Memorandum 64, dated 27 Feb 50, it stated:

"all practical measures be taken to prevent further Communist expansions in Southeast Asia. The neighboring countries of Thailand and Burma could be expected to fall under Communist domination if Indochina were controlled by a Communist-dominated government. The balance of Southeast Asia would be in grave hazard."

On 1 May 50, President Truman approved the initial allotment of \$10 million dollars for French Indochina. These actions signaled the beginning of Phase 2 of Vietnam's struggle for independence. The paramount issue not became clear ... it was Communist versus Anti-communist.

Phase 1 saw the formation of a new state ... Vietnam ... with Former Emperor Bao Dai as head of the government ... the new state was immediately recognized by the United States. The U.S. identified the threat, adopted the "Domino Theory", and started to provide financial aid to France. Recognition of the new state of Vietnam

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can be seen as the defacto basis for two Vietnams ... North and South. Only the boundary line between the two ... originally set at the 16th parallel by Truman's GO 1 immediately following the end of WWII ... was yet to be arbitrated. The U.S. was committed.

THE U.S. PRESENCE IN SEA

U.S. PERSONNEL ARRIVE IN SEA

The U.S. commitment was further evidenced by the physical presence of USAF personnel in SEA. For the next two decades, in support of National Policy, USAF personnel ... military advisors, maintenance and supply specialists, combat crews, and their logistics personnel were sent to French Indochina ... and later to its successor states, South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Personnel were generally sent TDY for specific purposes as requested or negotiated by the host government.

Several months prior to the crisis created by the battle of Dien Bien Phu, several hundred USAF mechanics were sent to SEA to keep U.S.-loan aircraft mission capable. During this same period, the French requested and received USAF assistance in flying troop reinforcements from North Africa to SEA to support the deteriorating military situation at Dien Bien Phu. Just prior to the fall of Dien Bien Phu, President Eisenhower and his advisors discussed U.S. intervention by USAF and Navy strike aircraft, and USAF B-29s to relieve the enemy pressure on the French garrison. Contingency plans were drawn up. However, several key congressional members balked at intervention unless the British agreed to participate. When Prime Minister Winston Churchill declined, the President dropped the idea of an air strike. Within a week, the French were overwhelmed by Viet Minh troops under General Giap.

THE GENEVA ACCORD

The day after the fall of Dien Bien Phu, a previously scheduled international conference was convened in Geneva, Switzerland, attended by representatives of the major powers and the Viet Minh, as representatives of the population in North Vietnam, to discuss a cease-fire agreement ... the agreement was approved 21 July 54.

The conferees recognized the Independence of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. They further agreed that Vietnam would be temporarily divided at the 17th parallel. National elections would be held on July 26 to unify the country. All forces were withdrawn and the French presence would be removed over several years. The protocols prohibited reinforcement of re-equipping local military forces with improved armaments. The protocols did not require the US MAAG, consisting of 342 men, to withdraw from SVN. The agreement also established an International Control Commission (ICC) to supervise the various agreements.

THE 17TH PARALLEL AND DMZ

A demilitarized Zone, (DMZ) was established at the 17th parallel, which separated North and South Vietnam. Vietnamese people on both sides were allowed to settle

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wherever they wished. Some 900,000 Vietnamese in the north decided to settle in the south. More than 100,000 Viet Minh soldiers and civilians in the south went north. As these populations moved, the north gained a politicized and mobilized population, while those who moved south were motivated largely by religion. The southerners who moved north became a significant factor in the subsequent armed struggle in the south.

In October 1954, with Ho Chi Minh still the principal actor, and nothing else new or different, the Democratic Government of Vietnam once more claimed to be the legitimate government of Vietnam. In the south, the State of Vietnam, now under the leadership of President Ngo Dinh Diem, proclaimed his state a Republic and was immediately recognized by President Eisenhower.

CONTAINMENT POLICY

In September 1954, the U.S. sponsored the creation of an eight-nation Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), which threw a mantle of protection over Laos and "the free territory under the jurisdiction of the State of Vietnam." The U.S. Senate ratified the treaty 1 Feb 55. All economic and military assistance was transferred from France to the new Saigon Government.

THE HO CHI MINH TRAIL

The Ho Chi Minh Trail was a conglomeration of winding roads and footpaths, which functioned for many years as an infiltration route between the northern and southern sectors of Vietnam. Shortly after the decision was made by NVN to unseat the SVN government by guerilla action and insurrection, a North Vietnamese Army Transportation Group began work to improve the rudimentary infiltration route through Laos to the South. By 1964, the trail had evolved into a maze of dry-season truck roads and smaller paths for bicycles and human portage. One year later it was the principal route for personnel and supplies to northern sectors of South Vietnam along the Cambodian border to Tay Ninh province. Base camps were established all along the trail. All agreed that this supply route would have to be interdicted in SVN was to retain its sovereignty. (See map)

OUTBREAK OF HOSTILITIES

GULF OF TONKIN RESOLUTION

In early 1964, the DGV intensified their diplomatic efforts to convene an international conference to neutralize all of Indochina. Failure of this effort in early July resulted in increased military activities by the Viet Cong, who turned July into the bloodiest month to date. On 2 Aug 64, NVN torpedo boats attacked the USS Maddox, a destroyer on patrol in the Gulf of Tonkin. Two nights later the Maddox and a second destroyer, USS C. Turner Joy, reported additional torpedo boat attacks against them. As a result of these attacks, the U.S. Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution of 7 Aug 64. The Resolution authorized the President to use all measures, including the commitment of the armed forces, to assist South Vietnam.

INTERDICTION OF LOCs

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Meanwhile, the newly assigned U.S. Ambassador to SVN, Maxwell Taylor, was searching for new approaches that would shore up the fragile government of SVN. In a memorandum to Washington dated 18 Aug 64, he proposed:

... a carefully orchestrated bombing attack against North Vietnam aimed primarily at infiltration and other military targets.

In November of that year, Ambassador Taylor was called to Washington to discuss with the President and his advisors future courses of action relative to the war in Vietnam. Among other agreements was the initiation of a graduated military response against the NVN lines of communications (LOCs). On 2 Dec 64 President Johnson approved a program of controlled air strikes against the NVN's LOC's in Laos. In the latter part of December, Barrel Roll operations got underway. In April 1965, Steel Tiger operations began, followed a short time later by Tiger Hound.

MISSION REQUIREMENT FOR THE AOs

ROLLING THUNDER ROUTE PACKAGE IN NORTH VIETNAM

To reduce mission interference between land-based Air Force and Naval carrier aircraft operating over North Vietnam, Admiral Sharp divided the bombing area into six major "Route Packages". The longer-range USAF aircraft attacked inland route package targets, while the shorter-range Navy aircraft concentrated on targets near the coast.

In April 1966, General Westmoreland was given the responsibility for armed reconnaissance in, and the intelligence analysis of, the "extended battlefield" area of Route Package 1, above the DMZ. (see map)

BARREL ROLL

The mission in Barrel Roll was primarily to support friendly ground units ... the Royal Laotian Army and Neutralist troops. Air support was essential to Maj. Gen. Vang Pao's army, consisting of approximately 5,000 CIA-trained Meo tribesmen living in Laos. Coordination and supervision of air activities were carefully controlled by an Air Attache and a small contingent of military and CIA personnel. (see map)

STEEL TIGER

Steel Tiger area was designated a separate operational area in April 1965. It consisted of the eastern Laotian panhandle adjacent to Vietnam. In Steel Tiger, the mission was armed reconnaissance and interdiction.

TIGER HOUND

After analysts had determined the bulk of the enemy's supply and infiltration was being accomplished through the Steel Tiger area, General Westmoreland, in December 1965, divided the area and called the southern half Tiger Hound. The separation was accomplished to allow more air power to be concentrated on a segment of the Ho Chi Minh trail more contiguous to SVN and used extensively by the infiltrators. Armed reconnaissance and interdiction efforts in that area

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increased. Later, the use of electronic sensors was also employed to keep track of enemy infiltration of personnel and supplies.

TALLY HO

Tally Ho began 20 July 66 when Air Force and Marines launched concentrated effort to interdict infiltration routes and strike other targets between the DMZ and the area 30 miles north into Route Package 1.

COMMAND AND CONTROL

HIGHER HEADQUARTERS

For various political reasons, command and control structure for Steel Tiger and other operations in Laos was complex. Because USAF aircraft flying over Laos were based in South Vietnam and Thailand, the U.S. Ambassadors in all three countries played important roles in controlling air operations. The position of the U.S. ambassador in Laos was unique. In the absence of a formal military command in Laos, he became the defacto military as well as political authority there. On air operations matters, he exercised his authority through the Air Attache. (see map)

In Saigon, the 2nd Air Division coordinated all U.S. air units involved in Steel Tiger. To meet the Thai political requirements, the 2nd AD's Deputy Air Commander was located in that country. In April 66, the Division was replaced by the 7th Air Force ... the Division Commander became the Deputy Commander 7th/13th Air Force ... reporting to the 7th AF on operational matters and to the 13th AF on administrative and logistic matters.

OPERATIONAL CONTROL

At the end of 1965, the military analyses of the strikes against the LOCs in Laos found them to be effective, but assets were not being used efficiently. Slippages, over-assignment and under-assignment of air assets were prevalent, strike pilots had difficulty locating and attacking targets, and rules of engagement were transient. All of these things contributed to an increase in infiltration efficiency. As a result, U.S. and Lao authorities agreed to concentrate more air power to the newly designated Tiger Hound area. Coincident with the analyses was the deployment of additional U.S. Forces in the region, which further strained the existing Command and Control System.

To accommodate the ever-expanding structure and to improve its efficiency, Air Force planners began to build a Southeast Asia Integrated Tactical Air Control System (SEAITACS). SEAITACS took over two years to be implemented. Force restructuring and assignments were in a state of flux during that two-year phase-in period. Included in SEAITACS, operational, command, communications, and support requirements were identified for the Tiger Hound program. Tiger Hound required more resources than the AF had employed in Laos to that time. (see map)

By late 1967, logistics caught up with operational requirements, resulting in increased efficiency in force application. SEAITACS also included provisions for a command and control structure that formed the basis for the Air War in Laos. The plan called for the establishment of an Airborne Battlefield command and control

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system. The Battlefield System called for an Airbattlefield Command and Control Center (ABCCC) ... the first was a SC-47, later replaced by the C-130 ... the ABCCC controlled all air operations within the strike area. AF O-1s, and A-1Es, along with Royal Laotian T-28s served as FACs. RF-101s and RF-4Cs were employed for target detection; UC-123s were used to defoliate jungle growth along the roads and trails; C-130 Flareships were also included as part of the system. Strike aircraft assigned were B-57s, F-100s, F-105s, and AC-47 Gunships. Substantial air assets from the Army, Navy, and Marines joined in the operation.

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

Rules of Engagement (ROE) also changed; the Steel Tiger/Tiger Hound area was divided into four zones. In zone 1, closest to SVN, pilots had relative freedom to strike targets of opportunity. However, the ROE were progressively more stringent in the three westward zones. In those areas, targets could not be attacked unless authorized Laotian officers, low-flying U.S. FACs, or by the Office of the American Ambassador (and his Air Attache's targets office, with FAC ops under Project 404 ... later known as the Ravens.)

COVEY GENESIS

The changes in the command structure were also noticeable in its subordinate units. For example, the 20th TASS was re-activated as part of the 505th Tactical Control Group (TACG) on 8 Nov 65, and was part of that group for ten months, then became attached to 6250th Tactical Air Support Group Provisional in September 1966. During the period when the SEAITACS was being developed, the subordinate unit structure was expanded and extended. The 504th TACG was created on 6 Dec 66.

Since its activation, the 20th TASS was based at Danang AB, SVN. To meet its varied mission requirements, it established a number of forward operation sites. Air Liaison Officers (ALO) were assigned to in-country operations, working with U.S. and Allied units in I Corps. The 20th TASS FACs flew with call-signs other than Covey. (See chart)

THE COVEYS

During 1967, Tiger Hound operations gathered momentum with each passing month, resulting in changes in operational rules. As previously noted, Laos had been divided into four zones. To improve operational efficiency, the 20th TASS was tasked to provide FAC coverage for Zones 1 and 2. To meet mission requirements, Zone 1 FACs operated out of Danang; Zone 2 FACs operated out of Pleiku. The Out-of-Country FACs call-signs were designated as COVEY. Danang's Coveys, operating in Zone 1, were the 200 series; Pleiku Coveys, operating in Zone 2, were the 500 series. The 20th TASS received the first O-2 aircraft in SVN, mainly to support the Out-of-Country Operation.

The 19th TASS, based at NKP, Thailand, was assigned to provide FAC coverage for Zone 3; these FACs were given the call-sign of NAIL (previous call-sign was Gombey.)

The Raven FACs provided coverage for Zone 4. (see map)

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The command structure and mission requirements remained the same for the next several years. Additional mission requirements were the support of Prairie Fire and Igloo White. At times, Covey FACs were also tasked to fly into NVN (the old Tally Ho area), to drop survival canisters to downed aircrews who were evading the enemy.

DEVELOPMENT OF TACTICS

Within the stable command structure, new tactics evolved to accommodate more specialized equipment and to counter technological advancement of the NVN. FACs were given specific geographic areas, over which they flew on a regular basis. They became thoroughly familiar with their area and would detect any changes that would indicate enemy activity or presence. It also simplified rendezvous procedures for strike aircraft. The nighttime capability was enhanced by use of the starlight scope. The starlight scope, developed by the Army, amplified starlight and moonlight, enabling the operator to see movement on the ground quite clearly at night.

STARLIGHT SCOPE AND FANS

As an extension of the starlight scope's capability was the assignment of navigators to the Covey FAC mission; they were called Forward Air Navigators (FANs). FANs were used almost exclusively during night missions; they readily adapted to the use of the starlight scope and quickly proved useful in many ways during the night missions. There is no question that addition of FANs to night missions increased the Covey's effectiveness of their night interdiction efforts. Their contribution to the FAC mission can be summed up by the Covey pilot's description of FANs ... FANs were either very good or bad, there was no middle ground; but, during night missions, even the bad FANs were good.

The FANs flew in the O-2, which enabled them to use the starlight scope. When the OV-10 entered the Covey inventory, the O-2s flew the bulk of the night missions. Later, technological advances in night vision devices enabled specially-equipped OV-10s to assume the night role as the O-2s were phased out of the Covey inventory.

IGLOO WHITE

Support of the Igloo White mission brought the Coveys in by default. Igloo White was a rudimentary, air supported, anti-infiltration system consisting of strings of seismic, acoustical, and electro-magnetic sensors dropped in designated jungle areas. These devices were strung along a number of infiltration roads and trails, and were capable of providing immediate information on sounds, movements of personnel and vehicular traffic. The information was transmitted to a high-flying EC-121 (Bat Cat), which relayed the information to NKP, where it was analyzed and collated with other information.

Critical to the entire operation was the exact placement of the sensors. The delivery aircraft was the F-4, and delivery procedures to the drop zone required the F-4 to come in very low and fast; the approach over a jungle area provided the pilot with few visually identifiable points to ensure exact placement of the sensors.

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To make this operation more efficient, Covey FACs were incorporated as part of the sensor placement. The Coveys marked the beginning of the proposed sensor location area, and then marked the ending of the drop area. The F-4, using the WP marks, lined up on both smoke marks and dropped the sensors between the marks; the area was photographed, and the sensor placement and location confirmed. The use of Covey FACs in this operation solved a lot of problems for Igloo White.

PRAIRIE FIRE

Prairie Fire was the code name for covert operations of the 5th Studies and Observation Group (SOG) in Laos. Initial reconnaissance teams were inserted into the border areas of the Laotian panhandle to locate and determine the extent of enemy traffic on the trail. This operation began in October 1965, and made significant contributions to the Steel Tiger operations by locating truck parks, POL and ammunition stores concealed by jungle growth or bad weather.

As Prairie Fire grew in numbers and mission scope, a designated Covey FAC, already familiar with the operational area, was assigned to each team. Each Prairie Fire Covey was checked out in working with a team, and flew with a Covey Rider. The Covey Rider was a member of SOG and a veteran of numerous Prairie Fire missions. He acted as liaison with the team on the ground and assisted the FAC in a variety of ways; the FAC and Rider quickly formed a complementary team. The Prairie Fire teams came to depend on the FAC for his ingenuity, composure, and when necessary, sheer determination.

COVEY PHASE - OUT

FORCE REDUCTIONS

Covey operations reached their peak during 1969. This period also ushered in a new and intense level of negotiations between the U.S. and representatives of NVN. In 1970, the first USAF elements began to leave Southeast Asia. The number of fighter and strike aircraft was reduced from a 1969 high of 737 to 277 by the end of 1971. Its personnel strength was reduced from 54,434 to 28,791.

INVASION

In late 1971, the NVN began deploying new forces southward. They stored huge amounts of supplies in their old sanctuaries along the Ho Chi Minh Trail next to the DMZ and in the central highlands area. On 30 Mar 72, the NVN launched a large, three-pronged invasion of the south (see map). Their goal was the conquest of the Northern Provinces. Meanwhile, another force invaded from Cambodia into Bihn Long and Tay Nimh Provinces northwest of Saigon.

In Military Region 1, the invasion force rolled across the DMZ, while others penetrated into MR II from Laos. All were supported by a considerable number of tanks and other armored vehicles. Meanwhile, another force invaded from Cambodia into Bihn Long and Tay Nimh provinces northwest of Saigon.

With Hanoi's forces ensconced inside South Vietnam below the DMZ, President Nixon launched Operation Linebacker. For the first time, the U.S. imposed a naval blockade and mined the waters of Haiphong and other North Vietnamese ports. Air strikes

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above the 20th parallel were renewed. By June, 1972, the North Vietnamese offensive had stalled outside of Hue. (see map)

COVEY VERSATILITY

During this period, the Covey mission expanded to meet the threat. Coveys flew in-country missions to support ground forces; they flew armed reconnaissance and support missions. OV-10s loaded with small bombs, 2.75-inch rockets, and 7.62 machine guns were a vital part of Danang Air Base defense operations. When the fighting subsided, the NVN were in control of the countryside just below the DMZ; they also controlled a strip of SVN running along the Laotian and Cambodian borders. Covey FACs were active from the DMZ down the eastern strip of Laos and into Cambodia.

In January 1973, the Coveys flew their last missions in Southeast Asia.

In April 1975, Saigon fell.

ACTIVATION AND DEACTIVATION

If one looks back at the fluidity of the Command Structure in 1965 prior to full implementation of SEAITACS, the Coveys and their parent Squadron, the 20th TASS, just prior to its inactivation, was again in a state of flux. On 15 Mar 72, the 20th TASS was assigned to the 366th Tactical Fighter Wing; then on 27 Jun 72, the 20th TASS was assigned to the 6498th Air Base Wing. On 15 Jan 73, the 20th TASS moved, without personnel or equipment, to George AFB, CA, and was assigned to 71st Tactical Air Support Group, where it was inactivated on 1 Apr 73.