CHAPTER I
THE THREAT

Introduction

On 9 June 1972, Major General Dewitt R. Searles, the Deputy Commander, Seventh/Thirteenth Air Force (7/13AF) at Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base, commented:

Shortly after my arrival in-country it was obvious that a threat to our Thailand bases existed from a communist-inspired insurgency. There were areas in full control of the insurgents and Royal Thai Government forces were not in full control of the situation. I therefore emphasized base defense.

The General also observed that:

The recent deployment of USAF resources to Thailand have (sic) caused threats to our bases to go up. The bulk of the United States Air Force strike force is now in Thailand. By the end of the month, 100% of this strike force will be here. This fact will not be lost on North Vietnam. There have never been more lucrative targets in all of Southeast Asia than are our Thai bases right now. Our greatest threat is trained sapper and mortar teams infiltrated from Cambodia and Laos, who, with local contacts, can be met, housed, and fed without detection until such time as they are ready to strike.

Background of USAF Presence in Thailand

Although there were a few USAF units in Thailand as early as 1961, the first significant increase of resources began in June 1964 with the deployment of the first tactical aircraft. The Gulf of Tonkin incident in August 1964 signalled the beginning of a period of significant growth.
By the end of 1964, there were over 6,000 USAF personnel in Thailand; RTAF bases at Udorn, Takhli, Korat, Ubon and Don Muang all hosted USAF units. At the close of 1966, nearly 26,000 personnel and 416 USAF aircraft were based in Thailand. By December 1967, two more bases, Nakhon Phanom RTAFB and U-Tapao RTNAF, were added, bringing to 505 the number of USAF aircraft conducting operations from Thailand. Then, in 1968, President Johnson ordered a halt to the bombing of North Vietnam. Subsequently, USAF forces in Thailand were gradually reduced. Operations ceased altogether at Takhli RTAFB, and by 1 April 1972 there were only 317 tactical aircraft in Thailand, including 42 B-52 bombers and 30 KC-135 aircraft at U-Tapao RTNAF. USAF personnel were also reduced significantly.

(The USAF posture in Thailand between 1961 and 1970 has been chronicled in several CHECO reports.)

The North Vietnamese invasion of South Vietnam in 1972 resulted in the TDY deployment of additional USAF units to Thailand. By 24 May 1972, the U.S. response to the communist invasion had increased USAF forces to 537 tactical aircraft, including 52 B-52 bombers and 62 KC-135 tankers, and 29,118 personnel. Probably the most spectacular example of the deployment was at Takhli RTAFB. By 24 May Takhli RTAFB had not only been reopened to USAF units, but it held 74 F-4D fighters and 16 KC-135 tanker aircraft. Further, U.S. Department of Defense press releases repeated in local Thai newspapers in June revealed that several, if not all, remaining USAF units then stationed in South Vietnam would soon be redeployed to Thailand.
In estimating the effect that this deployment had on base defense, the Director of Security Police, 7/13AF, said:

The threat to our resources at the Thai bases has materially increased since 1 April 1972. The build-up since then has made them more lucrative targets. The importance of these bases in the interdiction of the current offensive is not lost to the North Vietnamese.

Background of Communist Activity in Thailand

The subject of communist-inspired insurgency has been discussed in several CHECO reports. These reports indicate that although communist efforts at developing an insurgency movement in Thailand had been underway since the close of World War II, they were not very active until the 1965 expansion of the war in South Vietnam. There had been only 16 Communist Terrorist (CT) incidents in Thailand between 1962 and 1964. But between January and November 1966, there were 136 armed encounters between CT and RTG forces in the northeast provinces where four of the RTAF bases with USAF operations were located. Despite considerably increased communist activity, especially in the northeastern provinces, no overt, hostile communist activities were directed against USAF resources until the 26 July 1968 attack on Udorn.

This early absence of attacks should not be interpreted as an indication of communist disinterest in USAF activities. One CHECO report noted that the communist-inspired insurgency was at least in part directly related to increased USAF operations in Thailand in support of the war in South
Vietnam. A clandestine radio broadcast in 1968 by the communist "Voice of the People of Thailand" stated:

Since the Americans have invaded and occupied Thailand and used it as their base for aggression they have brought disaster to the nation and the people. U.S. soldiers have not only barbarously tramped upon the nation's sovereignty and independence, they have also caused severe hardships for the Thai people. They have debased our society. This is why people have expanded their resistance against them.

Increased U.S. presence in Thailand and U.S. participation in counter-insurgency activities further motivated communist propagandists. Several of the Rules of Engagement (ROE) which prohibited certain USAF activities related to base defense may well have sprung from a desire to minimize communist propaganda exploitation of the U.S. presence. These ROE will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

By early 1972, the number of communist-initiated encounters with RTG forces had risen alarmingly. There were 3400 such incidents in 1971 compared to 2700 in 1970. Further, estimates of CT main-force strength in the northeast alone showed an increase from between 1400 to 1600 men in 1970 to between 1525 to 1775 in 1971. In 1970, the RTG had designated 35 of the 76 provinces of the country as "Insurgency-Threatened Areas." These areas included every USAF installation in Thailand except Takhli and U-Tapao. Although the immediate, direct threat to USAF assets and personnel appeared slight, the existence of "Insurgency-Threatened Areas" did indicate the potential danger. In fact, several aircraft reported
ground fire in areas of high communist activity and even in close proximity to the major bases. (Figures on following pages show the areas of highest concentration of communist activities and the locations of USAF operations.)

Attacks on USAF Resources

Through 30 June 1972, communist forces made five attacks on USAF resources located at three RTAF bases. The first such attack was on 26 July 1968 against Udorn RTAFB. Subsequently, Ubon RTAFB was attacked on 28 July 1969, 13 Jan 1970, and 4 June 1972, and U-Tapao RTNAF on 10 January 1972. All attacks occurred during the hours of darkness and all were conducted by small sapper units armed with a variety of explosive devices.

Udorn 1968 Attack. On 26 July 1968, at 2230 hours, a CT "Dac Tong" (sapper) unit successfully penetrated the defensive perimeter of Udorn RTAFB and, despite detection, reached and damaged some USAF aircraft, killed a Thai Security Guard (TSG), fatally wounded a USAF crew chief, and wounded two security police defenders. A C-141 aircraft and an F-4D aircraft were heavily damaged. (An in-depth analysis of this first attack was the subject of a CHECO report.)

Following this attack, the Office of Special Investigation (OSI) issued an analysis of the incident, and concluded:
These predictions were to come true to a large extent in the next four years.

Ubon 1969 Attack. The next attack on USAF facilities came at Ubon RTAFB at 0130, 28 July 1969. A security police sentry and his dog were wounded when they detected the sappers exfiltrating the base. Half an hour later there were five explosions which damaged two C-47 aircraft and a power van. Five unexploded charges were discovered. Initially,
AREAS OF SIGNIFICANT COMMUNIST PRESENCE
(November 1972)
TOTAL ARMED STRENGTH
(6040-6470)

THAILAND: Areas of Significant Communist Presence

FIGURE 2
Thailand: Military Airfields

1. Nakhon Phanom
2. Korat RTAFB
3. Takhli RTAFB
4. Ubon RTAFB
5. Udorn RTAFB
6. U-Tapao RTNAF

FIGURE 3
A significant sidelight on the attack was that the K-9 sentry-dog handler who detected the escaping sappers did not immediately fire on them or report their presence to Central Security Control (CSC) because he assumed that this was part of a scheduled exercise. He later withheld fire, even though he realized they were hostile, because "his dog was in the line of fire." By the time the sentry notified other defense forces and they were able to respond, the enemy had escaped through the perimeter wire.

Ubon 1970 Attack. Ubon was again attacked by enemy sappers at 0201,
A message from the U.S. Embassy to the Department of State indicated that an analysis of this and the July 1969 attack strongly indicated that both attacks were carried out by either the same, or closely coordinated, sapper units that were specially trained and targeted by communist forces outside Thailand. Both the Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Air Forces (CINCPACAF), and the Deputy Commander, 7/13AF, sent messages expressing congratulations and extreme satisfaction with the professional response by the base defense forces. In the six months which had elapsed following the first attack, the security forces had become a well-trained, cohesive unit, capable of detecting and repelling such an attack.

U-Tapao 1972 Attack. Throughout 1970 and 1971, U-Tapao RTNAF was listed as having the lowest threat potential of any air base in Thailand.
However, without any prior intelligence alert, a communist sapper unit penetrated the base perimeter without being detected, then infiltrated to within a few hundred yards of parked B-52 aircraft before they were spotted by a sentry dog patrol.

At 0222 hours, 10 January 1972, a K-9 patrol detected three sappers about 15 feet ahead when his dog "alerted." The sappers fired at him and he took cover, trying unsuccessfully to have his dog attack the sappers. One sapper evidently fled and the other two ran toward the B-52 parking ramp. They were next seen by a TSG who withheld fire "because there were B-52 aircraft in a line behind the infiltrators." Another TSG tried to fire on the sappers as they ran down the ramp, but his M-16 jammed. The sappers threw satchel charges and one Chinese-made hand grenade into three revetments. The grenade was a dud, but four charges detonated, causing minor damage to two B-52s and more substantial damage to a third. The explosions caused an estimated $26,000 damage. One sapper tried unsuccessfully to fire a revolver at several maintenance personnel in the area. CSC dispatched SATs and Quick Reaction Teams (QRTs) to the scene. In the ensuing action, one of the enemy was wounded at the perimeter but escaped. Another was killed while attempting to exit the fenced Munitions Maintenance and Storage (MMS) area, about 100 yards from the perimeter fence. There were no USAF or Thai casualties.

Small arms fire was reported from positions off-base during the attack. RTG forces responded to the area very quickly, and a Provincial Police unit
conducted sweeps outside the perimeter within 30 minutes of the inception of the attack. Later, RTG military units also participated in searches. The last enemy contact was at 0235.

Overall, the attack was considered a failure and several levels of command quickly sent commendations to the defenders. Special emphasis was given to the RTG's prompt response.

However, the Deputy Commander, 7/13AF, in a lengthy message to the 7AF Commander, revealed several existing deficiencies. He noted the need for a four-channel radio communication system; the lack of a joint U.S.-RTG base defense plan; and the lack of joint training exercises in the past. General Searles also commented on the "calculated risk" inherent in the use of TSGs in base defense. He also singled out the inadequate fencing and a lack of effective vegetation control as additional weaknesses.

Another problem was the failure of the sentry dog to close with the enemy when commanded to attack. Higher headquarters took several steps to emphasize attack training and gunfire familiarization for sentry dogs to avoid similar problems. Additionally, an examination of the after-action evaluations raised a series of questions: 

Not Reviewed
A liaison patrol was a jeep patrol operated by the Thai Provincial police that made nightly sweeps within a 16km circle around the base. It consisted of three armed policemen and one unarmed USAF security policeman who provided communications and coordination with the base CSC.

The OSI analysis of the attack concluded:

Ubon 1972 Attack: Not Reviewed
An analysis of the incident indicated that the dead sapper was carrying out an intended diversion and that the prompt reaction by defense forces and the AC-130 flareship probably prevented a more serious sapper attack.

Threat Estimate, Jan-June 1972

During the first half of 1972, Hq 7/13AF Ground Combat Intelligence listed the overt action threat to USAF tenanted bases by enemy forces as follows: the threat of enemy reconnaissance of all bases was listed as high; the threat of large-scale mass attacks against any base was low; the threat of internal sabotage at all bases was high; and the threat of small-unit sapper attacks was high at Ubon RTAFB, moderate to high at NKP RTAFB, moderate at Udorn RTAFB and U-Tapao RTNAF, and low at Korat RTAFB and Takhli RTAFB. Additionally, the Joint United States Military
Advisory Group, Thailand (JUSMAGTHAI), indicated that standoff Rocket/Artillery/Mortar (RAM) attacks at some of the bases could be expected any day.

It was conceded that the threat of hostile actions directed against USAF forces by the local CT was relatively low, with the greatest danger coming from imported, highly trained, professional sapper units from Laos and North Vietnam. Several different sources provided proof of the real danger from military units outside Thailand. After the attack on Ubon RTAFB in June 1972, there were three encounters with remnants of that communist sapper force. One came on 5 June when Thai police had an armed encounter with them, and a second occurred on 6 June when the sappers ambushed a Royal Thai Army (RTA) unit. Both incidents occurred east of Ubon near the Laotian border. Then, on 10 June, two squads of the Royal Laotian Army engaged this force inside Laos, killing two of its members. Identification of the enemy indicated they were regular North Vietnamese Army (NVA) personnel.
The potential for a stand-off RAM attack was also proven to be within the enemy's capability. On 31 May 1972 over 100 CT, using rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) of the B-40/RPG-2 rocket type, attacked an RTG Village Defense Corps unit near Na Kae, less than 35km from Nakhon Phanom RTAFB. There were also confirmed reports of the use of 82mm and 60mm mortars by communist forces against RTG forces. Additionally, heavier rockets and mortars were readily available from several communist controlled areas of Laos. Nakhon Phanom RTAFB, itself, was within range of various weapons from the communist positions across the Mekong River in Laos. On 30 June 1972, reliable information was received about the first introduction of communist 122mm rockets into Thailand from Laos, approximately 45 miles north northwest of Nakhon Phanom RTAFB. Consequently, USAF defense planners characterized the risk of a stand-off attack "as a distinct possibility."

A consideration of the effective ranges of the several RAM weapons known to have been used by communist forces during that time frame emphasized the magnitude of the danger.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weapon</th>
<th>Range</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RPG-2 Anti-Tank Grenade</td>
<td>150-180 Meters</td>
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<tr>
<td>RPG-7 Anti-Tank Grenade</td>
<td>500 m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57mm Recoilless Rifle</td>
<td>4375 m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75mm Recoilless Rifle</td>
<td>6675 m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60mm Mortar</td>
<td>1790 m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>82mm Mortar</td>
<td>3040 m</td>
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<tr>
<td>120mm Mortar</td>
<td>5700 m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>107mm Rocket</td>
<td>8300 m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>122mm Rocket</td>
<td>10,073 m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>140mm Rocket</td>
<td>10,607 m</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Clearly, however, the focus of USAF defenses in the first six months of 1972 centered on sapper units attempting surreptitious penetration and sabotage. The two attempts of such action at U-Tapao RTNAF and Ubon RTAFB that year gave clear evidence of that threat.

Perhaps the best summary of the importance of the total threat was contained in messages from the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and CINCPACAF:

... The threat is expected to increase, it could become critical with very little, if any warning.44/

Due to the importance of Thai based air support, insurgent activity in Thailand is being followed very closely here [JCS] as a successful attack against these bases would have serious implications. In this regard, it is essential that all feasible actions be taken to assure the security of U.S. forces and equipment.45/