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BOOK EXCERPT

REFLECTIONS ON HISTORY'S LARGEST AIR WAR

Alfred W. McCoy

ABSTRACT: Foreword by Alfred W. McCoy to *Voices from the Plain of Jars: Life under an Air War,* edited by Fred Branfman with essays and drawings by Laotian villagers. (2nd ed. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013. xix + 176 pp.). First published in 1972, *Voices from the Plain of Jars* was instrumental in exposing the massive secret U.S. bombing of Laos during the Vietnam War. In this expanded edition journalist and peace activist Fred Branfman brings the story forward in time, describing the hardships that Laotians faced after the war when they returned to find their farm fields littered with cluster munitions—explosives that continue to maim and kill today.

Though this volume seems, at first glance, a slender collection of short statements and simple sketches, it is arguably the most important single book to emerge from the Vietnam War. Originally published more than forty years ago, *Voices from the Plain of Jars* is a collective memoir of the secret air war over neutral Laos, written, in part, by the ordinary Lao peasants who suffered under its bombs. Since there is no other book written by the villagers of Indochina, these "voices" can, in a sense, speak for the countless Vietnamese and Cambodians who also suffered under the U.S. bombing. Not only does the 2.1 million tons of bombs dropped on Laos from 1965 to 1973 rank among the largest air wars of the twentieth century, exceeded only by the 2.7 million tons dropped on Cambodia, but it also was a precursor for the way wars would be fought in the twenty-first century and beyond.[1] Through a unique fusion of first-person accounts and policy analysis by its author, Fred Branfman, this book recovers an obscure yet significant moment in military history and documents an air war so

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intense that it became a testing ground for a new form of global force projection.

This secret air war was part of a clandestine intervention in Laos necessitated by a major strategic miscalculation. As part of its larger cold war foreign policy of containing communism behind its own iron curtain, Washington formed a strategic alliance with Laos in the mid 1950s, specifically with its right-wing faction, marked by overt military aid and covert CIA political manipulations. During its first five years inside Laos, the agency maneuvered to keep both communists and neutralists out of power, using blatant bribes and electoral manipulations in what first seemed to many American officials an amusingly backward nation. According to a classified CIA history, Director Allen Dulles styled his agency's attempts at blocking a neutralist coalition in 1958 as a "youthful prank"; in follow-up elections, the agency, with this same puckish spirit, colluded in assigning the communist Pathet Lao 1,927 votes since that was the year CIA agent Stuart Methven was born; and field operatives backed General Phoumi Nosavan in a bungled bid to become the country's right-wing dictator.[2]

By 1960, such crude, capricious intervention had sparked a strongly nationalist reaction and brought Soviet air transports to Vientiane loaded with military aid for the neutralist faction, plunging the country into a civil war so volatile that it required resolution by an international conference at Geneva in 1962. Under the terms of that agreement, the Kennedy administration agreed to the diplomatic neutralization of Laos and reduced its formal military presence. Within just three years, however, this entente proved a major strategic miscalculation when North Vietnamese troops began infiltrating through southern Laos, threatening Washington's strategy for winning the Vietnam War. Barred from conventional military operations by the Geneva agreement, the White House opted for covert intervention, with secret Air Force bombing in southern Laos and CIA paramilitary operations in the north.[3]

As part of this clandestine intervention, the Kennedy administration launched a massive secret war in northern Laos, which Ambassador William Sullivan called "the other war," meaning it was somehow separate from the air war in the south. In this covert operation, U.S. military—apart from trying to slow the advance of Pathet Lao guerrillas—built a major radar base on Phou Pha Thi mountain for guiding fighters on bombing missions against North Vietnam and established a network of hilltop militia bases so that Hmong tribesmen and Thai mercenaries could conduct local combat operations and launch covert forays into North Vietnam.

From 1965 to 1973, tiny, landlocked Laos, then rated as the world's poorest nation, thus became the site of history's largest air war. From a few dozen missions daily in 1965, U.S. Air Force operations escalated steadily to reach a peak of 200 combat sorties daily over Laos between 1968 and 1970.[4] Even as the United States withdrew its ground forces from Vietnam after 1969, the Air Force

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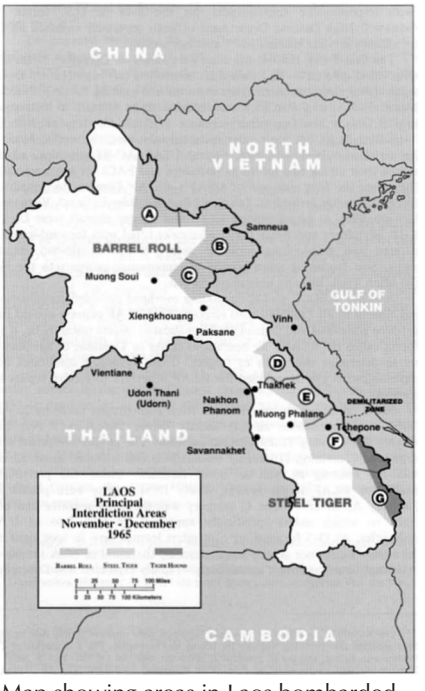
1. Khamvongsa and Russell 2001, 281; Owen and Kiernan 2006.
2. Ahern Jr. 2006, 11–12.
3. Anthony and Sexton 1993, 71–73, 107–33.
4. Ibid., 333.

bombardment of Laos continued and, in certain areas, intensified. Under the pressures of the general withdrawal from Vietnam, total air sorties for Indochina dropped from a peak of 20,000 per month in 1969 to 10,000 by 1971, and aircraft in theater declined from 1,800 to 1,100. But, reflecting the strategic significance of Laos within the wider Vietnam War, the Air Force shifted its residual capacity to focus overwhelmingly on this tiny country. From its four main bases just across the Mekong River in Thailand, the Air Force maintained, even in mid-1971, a fleet of 330 aircraft, including 125 of its workhorse F-4 fighter-bombers.[5] Additional fighter aircraft from aircraft carriers off the coast and bases in South Vietnam, as well as B-52s based in Guam and Thailand, were also deployed against Laos. Even as the Nixon administration withdrew ground troops from South Vietnam, it tripled the bombing of Laos, from an annual average of 129,482 tons in 1965–68 to an average of 387,466 tons per year in 1969–72.



Map showing areas in Laos bombarded during the "Barrell Roll" and "Steel Tiger" campaigns by the U.S. Air Force. (Credit: Jacob Van Staaveren, *Interdiction in Southern Laos, 1960–1968*. Washington D.C.: Center of Military History, 1993, p. 99)

Inside Laos, air activity was divided into two main arenas. Operation "Barrel Roll" provided tactical air support for CIA paramilitary operations against Lao guerrillas in the north and strategic bombing to destroy the supporting civilian infrastructure. Operation "Steel Tiger" deployed electronic sensors and massive bombardment in an attempt to cut North Vietnamese infiltration along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in the south. Reflecting U.S. strategic priorities, Steel Tiger in the south received about 85 percent of all sorties flown over Indochina circa 1970, while Barrel Roll in the north, the main focus of this book, received about 15 percent.[6]

As well as tripling in tonnage after 1968, the aircraft and ordnance for Barrel Roll's bombardment of northern Laos grew more lethal. Most importantly, the tonnage dropped by B-52 bombers on the north increased from 4,200 tons in 1970 to 25,000 tons in 1972.[7] To improve the accuracy of fast-flying jets like the Phantom F-4 that cruised at 600 miles per hour, the Air Force deployed the Snake Eye high-drag bomb equipped with flaps, thereby doubling its accuracy. By photo mapping the entire Plain of Jars, the main air base in nearby Udorn,

5. U.S. Air Force 1972, 53–54, 76, 78.
6. Anthony and Sexton 1993, 333.



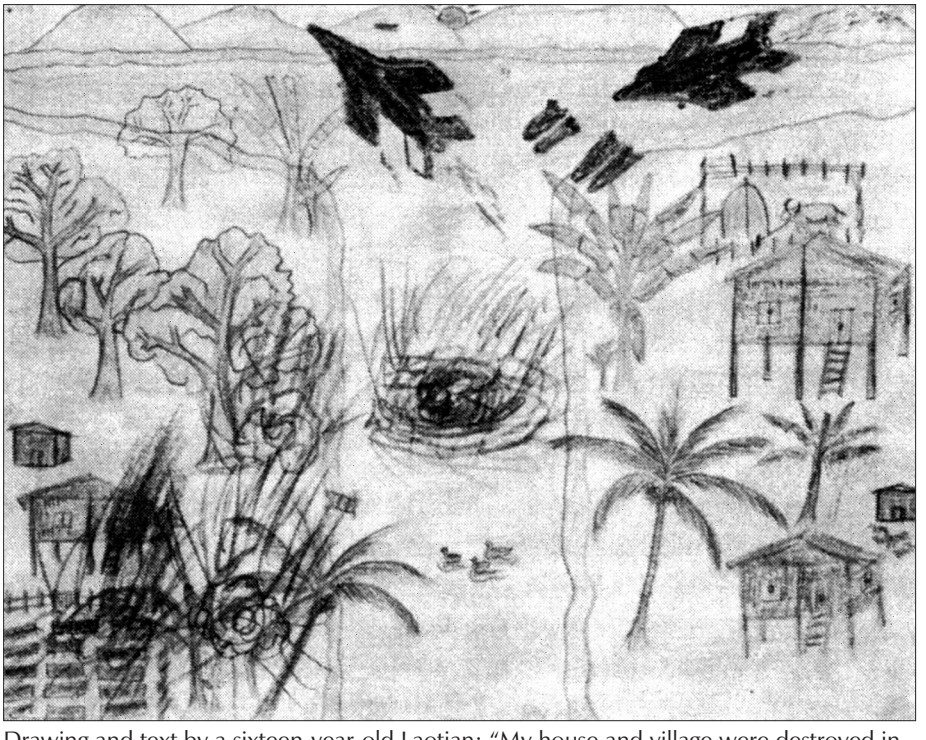
Drawing and text by "a twenty-seven-year old" Laotian. "In the life of the people of Xieng Khouang, there was war which brought death to the population and made it impossible to work, to grow rice, and to earn a livelihood. As in this picture, where there were people working in the rice field, in the garden, in the village, who were shot by the airplanes. The earth was struck and many, many cows, buffaloes, horses, and chickens also died."

Thailand, produced a photographic grid with coordinates for every feature, allowing transmission of target coordinates directly into the bombing computers of F-4 fighters for deadly accuracy.[8]

But, above all, the Air Force introduced a more efficient cluster bomb unit (CBU). At the bombing's start in 1965, U.S. aircraft had relied on the Rockeye II (Cluster Bomb Mark 20), a seven-foot-long clamshell with fins that opened, mid flight, to release "247 shaped-charge bomblets," each one detonating upon impact to discharge 200 steel pellets and thereby blasting an area the size of a football field with nearly 50,000 pellets. After 1970, U.S. fighter jets carried the CBU-38, with a reusable canister containing 40 fourteen-pound, antipersonnel bomblets with "bigger fragments, greater fragment velocity, and more incendiary effect." In a two-second bomb run, each F-4 Phantom fighter could disperse its normal load of three canisters to cover a 200 by 600 foot area with 120 bomblets. Instead of striking directly at enemy forces, the Air Force used this new ordnance to destroy "the enemy logistic network," allowing a wider, less discriminate bombing in civilian areas.[9]

By April 1973, the Air Force had dropped an estimated 2.1 million tons of bombs on Laos, which was equivalent to the entire tonnage the United States dropped on industrialized Germany and Japan during the whole of World War II. Of this total, about 1.7 million tons were concentrated in a strategic bombing

7. U.S. Congress 1975, 14266.
8. Anthony and Sexton 1993, 336.
9. Ibid.; U.S. Naval Museum of Armament and Technology n.d.



Drawing and text by a sixteen-year-old Laotian: "My house and village were destroyed in the eleventh month of 1968. Two F-4H planes flew over and bombed my village for forty-five minutes, causing the destruction of many houses in my village. I was impoverished. All of my belongings were burned, and I was caused great difficulties. Our clothing was lost and we faced the future without hope and built small shelters in the forest and jungle. But I had nothing with which to make a living because everything was destroyed by the bombs. So I had to leave my village with great sadness."

of the Ho Chi Minh Trail infiltration route through a narrow, lightly populated mountain corridor in southern Laos, producing limited collateral damage. But some 321,000 tons, twice the bombardment of Japan during World War II, were dropped on the Plain of Jars region in northeastern Laos, a populated area with some 200,000 people and the site of the ancient Lao Pheun civilization.[10] During the years of peak bombing on the Plain of Jars, its peasant population suffered heavy loss of life and property. Many were reduced to living in caves and working their fields in the few hours of twilight between the daylight tactical bombing and the nighttime strafing by AC-47 "Spooky" gunships.[11] Farmers who ventured into their fields during daylight faced sudden death from the air, a reality captured in this book's sketches of burning houses and dismembered bodies.

Apart from the heavy loss of life, this aerial bombardment also covered portions of northern Laos with countless thousands of antipersonnel bomblets that, even today, some forty years later, continue to maim and kill hundreds of

10. U.S. Congress 1975, 14266.
11. Anthony and Sexton 1993, 296–97.



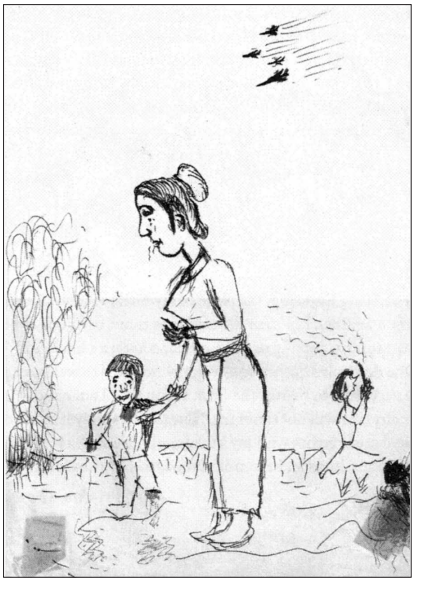
Artist and author unknown: "At that very instant when the gods were not generous, an event occurred that surpasses understanding, in which people lost their lives. This was another occasion of lakes of blood from the war planes' coming. These people were going together into the cave, but at that moment a bomb came without any knowledge of its having been dropped. This isn't like the courageous power of the skies in the time of Apollo; for this causes people to die without warning and in unknown numbers; some have their bodies completely blown apart."

residents every year in the Plain of Jars area. Since Congress approved the USAID's Leahy War Victims Fund in 1993, the United States has provided $51 million to assist in the removal of unexplored ordnance (UXO) in Laos, including a special appropriation of $5.1 million in 2010. This sum, however, has done relatively little to address the problem of the millions of unexploded cluster bomblets left behind by this U.S. aerial bombardment. Since the war ended in 1974, approximately 20,000 civilians have been killed or maimed by these unexploded bombs, and the number continues to mount. Only 0.28 percent of the area contaminated by UXOs has been cleared as of 2012, and countless subsistence-level farmers are still denied use of the land they need to survive.[12]

However, this bombing campaign is much more than an historical footnote to the Vietnam War. Under the pressures of history's longest and largest air war, the Air Force experimented with technological innovations, including computer-directed bombing, new antipersonnel bombs, aerial gunships of unprecedented power, and drone warfare. As the official Air Force history of this campaign explains, established military doctrine stated that "air power could not gain, hold, or occupy terrain; only ground forces could." But, with the

12. National Regulatory Authority 2010.

Drawing and text by a nineteen-year-old Laotian: "There was a woman who had only one son, whom she loved most dearly. He never cried and her heart was always happy with her child at all times. But one day the airplanes came and gave her heart unhappiness, for her son was struck by the airplanes and his leg was broken and his arm hit. It made him cry so, a cause for much sorrow. All children born into this world have hardship, but not like this."



Geneva agreement blocking intervention and the Royal Lao Army demoralized by a devastating defeat in 1969 that "virtually erased these forces as a factor in the war," "air power was all the [U.S.] embassy or the Royal Laotian Government had."[13] When President Nixon finally admitted the existence of this air war in March 1970 after six years of secret operations, he could, moreover, defend U.S. observance of Laos's neutrality by saying, "The United States has no ground forces in Laos."[14] Through this conjuncture of international and local factors, Washington was forced to rely on airpower in ways that demanded innovation.

By the time this bombing campaign drew to a close in 1973, the Air Force had overturned one of modern warfare's fundamental axioms by showing, for the first time, that airpower alone had the capacity to take hold of terrain without any infantry on the ground. Achieving this tactical breakthrough required a massive bombardment of unequalled intensity that was delivered without concern for collateral damage visited on the ordinary villagers below. Indeed, in the forty-some years since the bombing of Laos ended, the U.S. military has relied on air power as its main strike force in Bosnia, Kosovo, Kurdistan, Afghanistan, and Libya. Looking forward, Washington's future operations overseas are likely to rely primarily, perhaps even solely, upon airpower, making this long-forgotten air war over Laos the progenitor for warfare in the twenty-first century. In short, the bombing of Laos is a small topic of enormous import for an understanding of global power projection, both past and future.

In marked contrast to the hundreds of journalists who filled the rows of folding chairs for daily military briefings at the Joint Public Affairs Office (Juspao) in downtown Saigon, just a handful of freelance reporters hung about Vientiane, trying to ferret out a few scraps of information from covert operatives whose

13. Anthony and Sexton 1993, 106, 239.
14. Ibid., 327.

diplomatic cover helped conceal an elaborate, secret warfare apparatus. For nearly six years, the massive bombing campaign saturated the mountains of Laos, yet the operation somehow remained hidden from the American press and public. Even when Congress finally exposed the operation in 1970, reporters found it an impossible war to cover because there was no accessible data about its structure, scale, or impact. In sum, history's largest air war was effectively conducted within an information blackout.

Serving in Laos as an educational adviser, Fred Branfman was the only observer who discovered the full scale of the air war and documented its impact upon civilian refugees who had fled from the Plain of Jars region. By conducting extensive interviews with the Lao refugees from the bombing, pilots and personnel at bases in Thailand and South Vietnam, and a captain in charge of target selection at the U.S. Embassy in Vientiane, Branfman became the first to document the sheer scale of the massive air war over Laos. Most importantly, he was able to draw upon his prior experience in the villages as he made contact with refugees from the bombed areas of northern Laos and learned about the impact that the air war had had upon their lives. Instead of interviewing these villagers and serving as their surrogate voice, Branfman asked these peasant farmers to write first-person accounts of the bombing raids and illustrate them with their own detailed drawings of temples, houses, farmhouses, and fields being destroyed by detonation. Among the thousands of books on the Vietnam War, this is the only one written by ordinary villagers, whose voices give us not only a sense of the suffering on the Plain of Jars but also an understanding of the impact upon civilians across Indochina who lived under the 6.7 million tons of bombs that were dropped on the region.

The result is an extraordinary work that is both immediate and timeless. At the time *Voices from the Plain of Jars* was published back in 1972, the undeniable integrity of the eyewitness testimonies and the powerful visual evidence of the drawings shattered the six-year silence that had shrouded the secret bombing of Laos and contributed to a congressional ban on air activity over Cambodia.

Today, some forty years after the book's first publication, the significance of its message has, if anything, increased. For even as Branfman immersed himself in the suffering of the Lao peasants, he understood that he was not only witnessing the present but seeing the future. In articles, lectures, and congressional testimony, he argued that the air war over Laos had forged the future strategy for U.S. global force projection. He predicted, with uncommon prescience, that American soldiers would no longer fight and die on the ground as they had in Vietnam, but Washington would, in future wars, engage in automated warfare, using airpower to take and hold ground by sheer force of aerial bombardment.

Laos served as a testing ground for forging this new global strategy and thus offers the rest of the world an eloquent but cautionary message about U.S. foreign policy, today and in the future. That message, Branfman establishes, is that such bombing is deeply traumatic for societies subjected to it. While the secret air war over Laos devastated the Plain of Jars, its inhabitants suffered in silence, leaving only these drawings as a visual record of the destruction. But today even

those in the most remote villages can communicate their suffering to a wider world through cell phones, wireless Internet, or citizen journalists equipped with digital cameras and texting technology.

More changes are in store as world tensions persist and technology continues its relentless progress. After a decade of aerial warfare over Afghan-Pakistan borderlands, collateral damage from conventional bombing and unmanned aerial vehicles called "drones" has already roiled relations with the Karzai government in Kabul and aroused strong, popular opposition in neighboring Pakistan.[15] While the technological trajectory toward a capacity for worldwide aerial force projection is accelerating, the potential political opposition from communities using elements of the same communications technology is also a possibility, complicating Washington's bid for continuing global dominion via aerospace alone. While the form of this automated aerial warfare and possible diplomatic agreements that might restrain its use are still very much in flux, Branfman's slender volume stands as a telling reminder for the devastating impact this realpolitik exercise of global power can have for the ordinary villagers worldwide who might suffer its collateral damage.

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15. See Walsh, Schmitt, and Mehsud 2012.

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