

# ROYAL LAO AIR FORCE: N. A. T-6 TEXANS

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RLAF North American T-6 Texans at Luang Prabang in 1962  
(UTD/Leary/B75F5, former photo no. 1WL1-27-8-PC90)

## **The types of missions flown by the T-6s:**

In 1960, the Joint US Military Assistance Group (JUSMAG) at Thailand offered the Royal Thai Government five T-37s in exchange for Thai-owned T-6s to be transferred to US control and then given to Laos. On 3 January 61, four Lao pilots arrived at Kokethiem, Thailand, and after some days of training, the Lao, including detachment leader Major Thao Ma, on 9 January 61 ferried the first 4 of 10 T-6s to Savannakhet and then to Vientiane on 10 January for their first mission. By early February 61, the RLAf had received 8 T-6s, but not enough pilots, so that 4 Thai volunteer pilots were selected from the RThAF's 63<sup>rd</sup> Squadron of Don Muang.<sup>1</sup> The original contingent of T-6s destined for the RLAf was 6 aircraft from Royal Thai Air Force stocks. They were equipped with 5-inch rocket launchers and .30 caliber machine guns. One of the first Lao pilots described the training this way: "I was a member of the second T-6 class in 1961-62. Thirteen entered my class, but only eight were graduated. The first class graduated 12 out of 13. I received 11 hours of L-19 time at Kokatiem. The instructors were all Thai. Then I went to Korat for six months in the T-6, then back to

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<sup>1</sup> Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p. 46, note 52, p. 48, and pp. 50/1.

Kokatiem for gunnery.”<sup>2</sup> Victor B. Anthony and Richard R. Sexton give the following picture:<sup>3</sup>

● The first T-6 mission was unimpressive, however. Perhaps because the dry run tipped the government's hand, no Russian aircraft were sighted nor was any military traffic seen on the road. The pilots chose to expend their ordnance on two bridges in the area. “Jammed guns, unspent rockets, and aborts” was the way Colonel Law summed up the results. Trying to find a silver lining, General Heintges thought the very fact that the T-6s had gotten into the air and flown a strike mission would leave the communists uneasy.<sup>20</sup>

● The poor showing of the LAAF prompted Admiral Felt to urge Heintges to schedule sorties into the Plain of Jars where intelligence reported Kong Le was receiving nearly fifty tons of supplies a day. CINCPAC wanted these “juicy targets” hit and told Heintges he expected reports soon to show that the T-6s were destroying more tonnage than the communists were supplying. He also ordered the Pacific Fleet (PACFLT) and PACAF each to send one experienced fighter-bomber pilot for temporary duty with the PEO. Adm. John Sides, USN, CINCPACFLT, immediately dispatched a Marine aviator to Vientiane; and Gen. Emmett O'Donnell, Jr., CINCPACAF, furnished an Air Force major for Savannakhet. Unfortunately, the latter officer came down with dysentery and spent most of the duty tour on his back. Meantime, the LAAF pilots claimed their first kills on January 14—two trucks near Vang Vieng. The victories were short lived; on January 17, one of the T-6s was shot down. The pilots soon complained of the aircraft's slow speed (140 knots) and the difficulty in making attacks with guns and rockets instead of bombs and napalm.<sup>21</sup>

● Morale of the Laotian pilots hit bottom when PEO members and top-ranking officers openly criticized their ability. Such criticism seemed justified based on the results achieved, while in reality it underscored the ignorance of air matters that were inherent in the PEO and the FAL, both dominated by ground force personnel. They did not appreciate the fact that a tactical air arm, no matter how small, could not be created overnight. The pilots had flown the T-6 before, but they had no previous combat experience and little or no training in tactics or tactical operations. Their most recent flying was confined to liaison aircraft or C-47s, and the Thai checkout, which took less than a week, hardly qualified them as strike pilots. The program was actually a half measure that hoped to achieve quick results in operational performance. Like most “get rich quick schemes,” it had ended in failure. Furthermore, the T-6 aircraft (designed in 1937) bordered on the obsolete.

Generally speaking, the effectiveness of the T-6 seems to have been limited. In 1961, T-6s strafed Kong Le-Pathet Lao forces along Route 13 so that the Soviet Union protested to the United States. But, for example, in January 62, repeated T-6 strikes were unable to silence a Pathet Lao mortar which was firing on the besieged government stronghold of Nam Tha, so that the town was overrun shortly afterwards.<sup>4</sup>

A lot of T-6s were lost: One T-6 was shot down over Sala Phou Khoun on 17 January 61, one T-6 crashed during a training flight on 11 March, two T-6s collided in midair during operations near Tha Thom on 12 March 61, and one T-6 received ground fire and crash-landed near Tha Thom on 31 March 61.<sup>5</sup> But when a T-6 was lost, it was immediately replaced from Thai sources to maintain RLAF strength at 6 aircraft.<sup>6</sup> In Fiscal Year 1961, i.e. the period from 1 July 60 to 30 June 61, no less than 16 T-6s had been programmed and delivered, but at the end, only 9 were still in the RLAF inventory.<sup>7</sup> At the end of Fiscal Year 1962, i.e. on 30 June 62, only 6 T-6s out of 18 “recovered from Thailand and redistributed to Laos” were left.<sup>8</sup> One year later, on 30 June 63, only 5 of these 18 T-6s were still in the

<sup>2</sup> Pratt, *The Royal Laotian Air Force 1954-1970*, p.4.

<sup>3</sup> Victor B. Anthony / Richard R. Sexton, *The War in Northern Laos*, Washington DC (Center for Air Force History) 1993, p. 37.

<sup>4</sup> Pratt, *The Royal Laotian Air Force 1954-1970*, p.7.

<sup>5</sup> Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p. 51.

<sup>6</sup> Pratt, *The Royal Laotian Air Force 1954-1970*, p.8.

<sup>7</sup> Liebchen, *MAP Aid to Laos 1959-1972*, p.150.

<sup>8</sup> Liebchen, *MAP Aid to Laos 1959-1972*, p.152.

RLAF inventory, and still one year later, all T-6s had gone<sup>9</sup> – the few remaining T-6s that were still flyable had been returned to Kokatiem in Thailand by American pilots.<sup>10</sup>

Documents from which to identify the RLAF T-6s are not available, and photos are extremely rare. One of them, depicting a RLAF T-6 coded “LTA-559”, but also bearing a small and unreadable serial on the fin, can be found at <http://ravenfac.com/ravens/Adventures/Episode0000.htm> . As the roundel cannot be seen, this aircraft may have been a Royal Thai AF T-6 in RLAF service, as RThAF T-6s sometimes had large codes painted on the side of the fuselage (see the photos at [http://thai-aviation.net/Photos\\_Air\\_Force\\_F1.html](http://thai-aviation.net/Photos_Air_Force_F1.html)). Other photos of RLAF T-6s seem to show that the T-6s in RLAF service only had small numbers like “1”, “10” (see the photo above), or “2” (see the photo at [http://i60.photobucket.com/albums/h29/eh1656/rlaf\\_t-6g\\_2.jpg](http://i60.photobucket.com/albums/h29/eh1656/rlaf_t-6g_2.jpg)) on the engine. As the Royal Thai Air Force had as many as 220 T-6s in their inventory (see [http://thai-aviation.net/files/Air\\_Force\\_Detail.pdf](http://thai-aviation.net/files/Air_Force_Detail.pdf) ), it is not possible to identify the ones that flew for the Royal Lao Air Force.

### **The individual aircraft histories:**

Type	registration / serial	c/n (msn)	date acquired	origin
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<sup>9</sup> Liebchen, *MAP Aid to Laos 1959-1972*, pp.154+156.

<sup>10</sup> Pratt, *The Royal Laotian Air Force 1954-1970*, p.11.