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EFFECTS OF WEATHER ON TACTICAL
AIR OPERATIONS OVER NORTH VIETNAM AND LAOS

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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FOREWORD

This report, prepared in the Office of Basic Intelligence, describes and assesses seasonal weather conditions in North Vietnam and Laos and the effect of those conditions on tactical air operations. Tactical air operations, in this sense, include low-level aerial reconnaissance as well as low-level bombing and combat air support and supply. For the most part the report is not pertinent to high-altitude operations, nor is it suitable for use in support of specific air operations. Data used are derived from climatological observations made over a period of many years and, therefore, constitute averages. Individual weather conditions may vary suddenly and considerably from the norm.

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EFFECTS OF WEATHER ON TACTICAL AIR OPERATIONS
OVER NORTH VIETNAM AND LAOS

Summary

The monsoonal airflows that control weather conditions in Southeast Asia are strongly affected by terrain barriers such as the Chaine Annamitique that separates Laos from North Vietnam and South Vietnam. Different weather conditions, accordingly, prevail in different parts of Laos and North Vietnam.

From mid-May to mid-September, low closely packed clouds sweep out of the southwest, dumping torrential rains and limiting air-to-ground visibility over Laos. Air-support operations may have to be curtailed during this period. Across the Chaine Annamitique in North Vietnam, conditions are only slightly better for tactical air operations. Cloudiness still prevails and operational conditions are fair at best.

From mid-October to mid-March, when prevailing winds are out of the northeast, the contrast in climatic conditions is more pronounced. Throughout Laos and in northwestern North Vietnam skies are frequently clear and tactical air operations can be planned with relatively little fear of interference from the elements. In the rest of North Vietnam, however, the crachin -- a low and continuous cloud cover accompanied by drizzly rain -- prevails during the latter part of the period and operations requiring air-to-ground visibility may not be possible for days at a time.

In general, the most favorable periods for tactical air operations in the various regions of North Vietnam and Laos are mid-October to mid-March in Laos and northwestern North Vietnam; mid-September to mid-October in the rest of northern North Vietnam; and mid-March into August in southern North Vietnam.

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I. General Climatic Background*

North Vietnam and Laos have a tropical monsoon climate characterized by two major seasons -- that of the southwest monsoon, usually prevailing from mid-May to mid-September, and that of the northeast monsoon, usually prevailing from mid-October to mid-March. These major seasons are separated by two short transitional periods -- the autumn transition, from mid-September to mid-October, and the spring transition, from mid-March to mid-May. This seasonal alternation of wind direction controls almost every aspect of the weather, with marked local variations determined by the situation of mountain ranges, especially the Chaine Annamitique, which lies at right angles to both monsoonal airflows and which forms most of the border between North Vietnam and Laos.

During the southwest monsoon, warm moist air sweeps in from the Indian Ocean, bringing frequent precipitation to the region. Much of this summer precipitation is intercepted by the southwest-facing slopes of the Chaine Annamitique. Rainfall is heaviest on the exposed mountain slopes in eastern Laos, but even the leeward coastal areas to the east receive some moisture. The northern part of North Vietnam receives considerable precipitation during the southwest monsoon from winds that after crossing the Chaine Annamitique turn northward and pick up moisture from the Gulf of Tonkin before flowing back in over the land.

In contrast to the ocean-born southwest monsoon, the northeast monsoon originates over central Asia and reaches the region after traversing the southern part of China. At this time of year, relatively dry conditions prevail over much of the region. The southern part of North Vietnam is an exception. This area receives heavy precipitation during autumn and early winter from the moisture accumulated as the northeast monsoon passes over the Gulf of Tonkin. Again, the Chaine Annamitique acts as a barrier to these moist winds but at this season receives most of the precipitation on its east-facing slopes.

North Vietnam and Laos are tropical regions, and temperatures and humidities are high all year. A slightly cooler period is experienced in the north during the northeast monsoon season, but this is only a relative change from the sultriness of the other seasons. Temperatures are still high, and humidities are often very oppressive. Low temperatures are experienced only in the higher mountains, where they may drop below freezing.

II. Effects of Weather on Tactical Air Operations

Weather conditions over most of North Vietnam and Laos limit the conduct of air operations throughout most of the year. No season experiences

* For data on weather conditions in this area, see Tables 1 through 3.

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long periods of clear weather. Cloudiness, low ceilings, fog, and generally poor air-to-ground visibility are the chief limiting factors. Other phenomena that adversely affect air operations are widespread thunderstorms and associated turbulence, typhoons, and a period of persistent low overcast with fog and drizzle that is known locally as the crachin (from the French word cracher, to spit). Of lesser significance are such conditions as icing and clear air turbulence.

The most serious limitation is the prevalence of numerous low clouds and fog and the resultant low ceilings and poor air-to-ground visibility. Cloudiness prevails throughout the year in most of the region, with only moderate seasonal fluctuations. Diurnal variations in cloud cover are probably greater than seasonal variations, and, at certain hours of the day at any season, relatively clear conditions may exist over a target for a short time. In many cases, this is a definitely local condition, and the need for timely information on the current conditions of visibility over a specific target complicates operational planning. These spotty local conditions may also influence the selection of the route to and from a target. If time over the target is critical, the weather en route becomes a serious factor because it may make detours necessary. Poor visibility en route also makes it difficult to spot ground checkpoints needed for navigation. Fog and low ceilings are common and seriously limit low-level operations. It is hazardous to attempt to fly under low clouds because of the mountainous terrain. In general, visibility is much better at high altitudes than at low altitudes.

Thunderstorms occur most frequently during the southwest monsoon season and in spring, commonly about midday. Most such storms are fairly short but extremely violent and must be skirted by aircraft in flight. Severe turbulence is experienced in and around thunderstorms, particularly during the spring transition season. Thunderstorms often may interfere with a mission either by obscuring a target or by necessitating long detours en route to or from the target area.

Occasionally a typhoon may interfere with air operations for a few days. Such typhoons originate in the South China Sea and may strike the coast of North Vietnam at any time between July and late November but are most common in August, September, and October. The direct passage of a typhoon will force cessation of all air operations. Sometimes a typhoon that approaches but does not strike the coast of North Vietnam interferes with air operations. Although 18 typhoons reached the general area of North Vietnam in the period 1947-56, only 5 were of typhoon intensity by the time they reached the coast. The typhoon season in the South China Sea extends from May into January, but by late November the track of typhoons usually is too far south to affect North Vietnam.

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The prolonged spell of crachin weather occurs in North Vietnam from about December through April. This period of light rain or dull and gloomy drizzle is accompanied by low stratus clouds, mist, and fog, although the total amount of precipitation usually is small. The crachin affects air operations seriously, especially operations below about 8,000 feet, because of its limiting effect on air-to-ground visibility, its widespread character, and its seasonal persistence. Once the crachin season begins, it dominates weather conditions in North Vietnam until well into the spring.

Icing conditions and turbulence not associated with thunderstorms or other convective activity are not serious limiting factors for air operations in Laos and North Vietnam, but some upper-air turbulence may be expected. Aircraft icing may occur between 15,000 and 25,000 feet during the southwest monsoon season, when the air is laden with moisture, but it can be avoided by flying a few thousand feet higher or lower. Most of the turbulence experienced over the region is associated with thunderstorms and other convective activity.

A. Region A -- Laos and the Highlands of Northwest North Vietnam*

1. Southwest Monsoon Season (Mid-May to Mid-September)

This is a poor season for air operations -- the moisture-laden southwest monsoon brings much cloudiness to Laos. The land, which gradually rises eastward, presents an upslope to the southwesterly air-stream and, together with the normal processes of convection, causes a general lifting of the air. Conditions are poorest in the southern half of Laos, where the monsoonal flow of air has a tendency to pile up against the Chaine Annamitique and form dense masses of cumulus and cumulonimbus clouds. In the north the clouds are less dense because the originally wet winds have lost some of their moisture as they traveled long distances over the land. A normal daily pattern is one of scattered low clouds in the morning increasing to broken clouds or overcast by afternoon. By mid-afternoon it is very common to have towering cumulus or cumulonimbus clouds extending above 50,000 feet. After a nocturnal thunderstorm, clouds frequently dissipate by midmorning.

Ceilings are low at this time of year and air-to-ground visibility is generally poor. During the early morning the ground frequently is obscured by fog. Scattered clouds begin to build up later in the morning and, although in many cases they do not constitute a normal ceiling of 60 percent or more of cloud cover, they are low. They restrict visibility and make flying difficult. Shower or thunderstorm activity later in the

* Region A (Laos and the Highlands of Northwest North Vietnam), Region B (Northern North Vietnam), and Region C (Southern North Vietnam) are shown on the accompanying map.

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day would reduce the ceiling and make low-level flying very hazardous. Probably the best time of day for flying is between 0800 and 1000, after the fog has cleared and before shower activity has begun.

Turbulence associated with the towering cumulus and cumulonimbus cloud formations is widespread and can be very severe in thunderstorms. Minimum turbulence occurs at night after 2200 and before daylight -- except during nocturnal thunderstorms, which are more serious than those during the day because they are more difficult to see from the air.

2. Autumn Transition Season (Mid-September to Mid-October)

During this season, cloudiness decreases as the drier, cooler air from the northeast monsoon begins to enter Laos. There is a marked decrease in the total amount of low-lying clouds and a corresponding increase in the frequency of clear days. Thunderstorm activity still occurs but not as often. Clouds continue to build up toward afternoon, except along the Mekong River where low clouds that have accumulated during the night tend to dissipate during the day. Air-to-ground visibility is markedly better than in the southwest monsoon season. Morning fog is still very common, but clearer skies and higher ceilings provide much better visibility. It is possible that the mountainous terrain would provide enough identifying features above the fog for navigation checkpoints and that some missions could be carried out despite the restricted ground visibility. The best time of day for air operations is from 0800 to 1000, before the general cloud buildup of midafternoon. From 1700 until dark is generally another period of good air-to-ground visibility.

3. Northeast Monsoon Season (Mid-October to Mid-March)

The northeast monsoon season is the best time of year for air operations. Skies are frequently clear and cloudiness is at its seasonal minimum, although there are considerable variations locally, especially in the south where moist air enters Laos through low passes in the Chaine Annamitique and the resultant cloudiness is somewhat heavier than in the rest of the country. Morning fog still occurs, especially in the deeply entrenched northern valleys where it is often so thick that as it lifts, layers of low clouds form. An afternoon buildup of cumulus clouds is common, but complete overcast even at this time of day is rare. Weather conditions are generally good, and air-to-ground visibility is at its best. Near the end of this season the smoke from brush fires sometimes interferes with air-to-ground visibility.

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4. Spring Transition Season (Mid-March to Mid-May)

Cloudiness increases gradually, and visibility becomes poorer as the spring season progresses. At times, cloud amounts increase rather abruptly, especially in association with thunderstorm activity. Thunderstorms are most violent at this time of year, and severe turbulence associated with them as well as widespread convective activity is common throughout the country. In late April and early May, the steadily increasing daily amounts of cloudiness are reflected by increased frequencies of low ceilings. Also early in the season, when it is relatively dry, air-to-ground visibility is hampered by smoke from brush and grass fires. The smoke and dust are generally dispersed as thunderstorm activity increases, wetting down the ground and clearing the atmosphere, but by this time cloudiness is building up to its summer seasonal peak. In general, conditions for flying are not as bad as during the summer southwest monsoon but are much poorer than during the winter northeast monsoon.

B. Regions B and C -- Northern and Southern North Vietnam

1. Southwest Monsoon Season (Mid-May to Mid-September)

The wet southwest monsoon brings much cloudiness to North Vietnam, and conditions for air operations during this season are poor in the north and only fair in the south. Cloudiness is most widespread in the north, where the mechanical uplifting of the air as it reaches the mountains combines with the normal convective processes to form large cumulus or cumulonimbus clouds. On the leeward side of the Chaine Annamitique south of Thanh Hoa the atmosphere becomes somewhat drier because of the downslope motion of the airstream after it has crossed the mountain barrier, and cloudiness is somewhat less than in the north. Air-to-ground visibility is not good during this season even though clouds are usually scattered. Fleecy clouds at low elevations commonly interfere with effective visibility for pilots. During the morning, cloud bases below 1,000 feet are common, but, as the day continues, low clouds tend to disappear and the cumulus cloud bases usually form at elevations of 2,000 to 3,000 feet. During the frequent midday thunderstorms, which are usually short, ceilings are considerably lower. Completely clear afternoons over any part of North Vietnam are relatively rare during the southwest monsoon season. In general, the best time of day for an air operation during this season is from 0900 to 1100, at which time the morning fog has burned off and the midday buildup of clouds has not yet reached its peak. Conditions in the south are slightly better than in the north. Even at its worst in mid-afternoon, air-to-ground visibility is still frequently good in the south and definitely better than in the north. Visibility at night is generally good after midnight.

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Extensive low stratus clouds occur whenever a typhoon enters the Gulf of Tonkin and approaches within 100 miles of the coastline, and they reduce visibility considerably. During this season typhoons are most common from late July on, and the passage of a typhoon over the country would disrupt all air operations for a few days.

2. Autumn Transition Season (Mid-September to Mid-October)

In autumn, conditions for air operations begin to improve in the north and deteriorate in the south. This is probably the best time of year for air operations in the northern part of the country, as there is a marked decrease in amounts of cloud cover. Conditions are poor in the southern part of the country, which is on the windward side of the Chaine Annamitique at this season and receives increasing amounts of precipitation with accompanying heavy clouds. In the north, low ceilings are slightly less frequent and air-to-ground visibilities are slightly better in autumn than during the preceding southwest monsoon season, mainly because there is less thunderstorm activity. In contrast, the conditions for air operations in the south have deteriorated from those of the southwest monsoon season. Afternoon convective activity combined with the orographic effects of the rising moist airmass from over the Gulf of Tonkin causes frequent showers, and as a result visibility is reduced. As in the southwest monsoon season, the best time of day for air operations probably is 0900 to 1100, but conditions are better in the north than in the south. In the north the period from about 1700 until darkness also offers good conditions for flying. This is the typhoon season and one of these storms may strike North Vietnam at any time, totally disrupting operations for a few days.

3. Northeast Monsoon Season (Mid-October to Mid-March)

Although weather conditions become generally good in Laos during the northeast monsoon season, conditions for air operations in southern North Vietnam are poor. This is the cloudiest time of the year, as the frequency of cloud bases at low altitudes increases. Conditions in northern North Vietnam remain fair with generally favorable flying conditions until the advent of the crachin in January.

The pattern of favorable conditions in the north and unfavorable conditions in the south changes about December to general unfavorability everywhere as the crachin approaches. This period of low persistent overcast with fog and drizzle and few, if any, sunny days lasts through the remainder of the northeast monsoon season and into the spring. During the crachin, which is most widespread from January until early April, the persistent low clouds, drizzle, and poor air-to-ground visibilities frequently make air operations that depend on visual contact with the ground impossible. Skies are generally clear above 6,000 to 8,000 feet, but the land is obscured. In general, the crachin is a coastal condition

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and is restricted to the eastern lowland areas, although it does move up some of the gently sloping valleys and penetrates adjacent upland mountain areas. Breaks of clear weather during the crachin season are infrequent. In the southern part of North Vietnam the crachin is not as widespread or as well developed as in the north, and the chances of good weather for air operations are slightly better.

4. Spring Transition Season (Mid-March to Mid-May)

During the early part of this season the crachin is still in evidence, but the forces that create and maintain it are rapidly weakening. Spring is a season of decreasing cloudiness and increasing thunderstorm activity. Conditions for air operations are generally favorable, at least in comparison with the preceding and succeeding seasons. They are much better than during the latter part of the northeast monsoon and at least as good as during the southwest monsoon of summer. Conditions in the south probably are at their best for the year. The best time of day for air operations probably is late morning, after the morning clouds have been burned off by the sun, which is almost directly overhead at this time of year. Thunderstorms are particularly violent at this season, and turbulence associated with them is severe.

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Table 1

Laos and North Vietnam
Generalized Seasonal Evaluation of Weather Conditions for Air Operations

<u>Season</u>	<u>Region A Laos and Highlands of Northwest North Vietnam</u>	<u>Region B Northern North Vietnam</u>	<u>Region C Southern North Vietnam</u>
Southwest Monsoon (Mid-May to Mid-Sep)	Poor	Poor	Fair <u>a/</u>
Autumn Transition (Mid-Sep to Mid-Oct)	Fair	Fair <u>a/</u>	Poor
Northeast Monsoon (Mid-Oct to Mid-Mar)	Good <u>a/</u>	Fair (Mid-Oct to Dec) Poor (Dec to Mid-Mar)	Poor
Spring Transition (Mid-Mar to Mid-May)	Fair to Poor	Fair to Poor	Fair <u>a/</u>

a. Best season for air operations.

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Table 2

Laos and North Vietnam
Mean Cloudiness

	Percent											
<u>Station</u>	<u>Jan</u>	<u>Feb</u>	<u>Mar</u>	<u>Apr</u>	<u>May</u>	<u>Jun</u>	<u>Jul</u>	<u>Aug</u>	<u>Sen</u>	<u>Oct</u>	<u>Nov</u>	<u>Dec</u>
Hanoi	77	84	87	82	75	78	78	77	68	60	67	68
Lao Kay	85	83	77	71	68	73	74	71	68	73	76	75
Mon Cay	77	87	87	83	75	79	76	74	65	56	60	65
Nam Dinh	82	86	90	91	78	74	79	76	73	61	66	68
Dong Hoi	78	78	77	64	57	60	66	65	70	70	79	81
Vinh	84	87	84	74	71	70	73	74	77	76	83	83
Luang Prabang	53	34	32	36	51	59	69	69	54	47	50	52
Pakse	40	39	45	60	73	82	88	86	86	68	61	48
Thakhek	19	32	37	51	71	81	84	84	76	48	33	25
Vientiane	34	39	35	48	73	81	88	84	79	51	48	39

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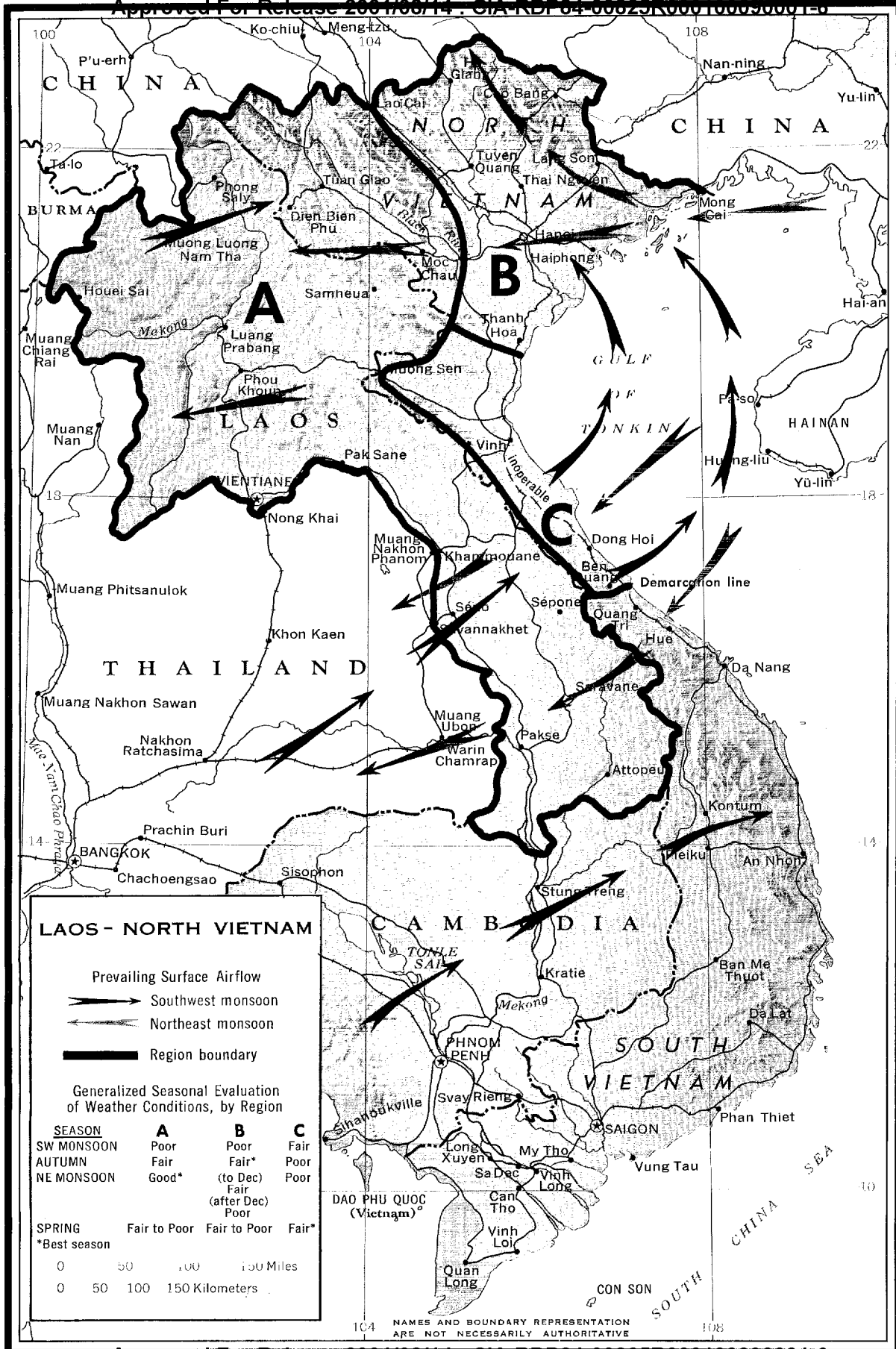
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Table 3

North Vietnam
Mean and Maximum Number of Days with Crachin Weather

<u>Station</u>		<u>Jan</u>	<u>Feb</u>	<u>Mar</u>	<u>Apr</u>	<u>May</u>	<u>Jun</u>	<u>Jul</u>	<u>Aug</u>	<u>Sep</u>	<u>Oct</u>	<u>Nov</u>	<u>Dec</u>
Hanoi	Mean	11	12	19	13	1	a/	0	a/	0	1	3	8
	Max	18	20	23	20	3	1	0	1	0	3	9	17
Mon Cay	Mean	11	12	16	12	a/	0	0	0	0	1	5	8
	Max	16	18	25	19	1	0	0	0	0	2	13	21
Nam Dinh	Mean	10	13	19	12	1	0	0	0	a/	1	5	8
	Max	15	18	27	18	3	0	0	0	2	3	10	16
Dong Hoi	Mean	9	9	10	4	0	0	0	0	0	1	7	8
	Max	17	18	16	9	0	0	0	0	0	1	14	17

a. Less than half a day.



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Via: DIASA-2C, Room 2 D 233, Pentagon
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Defense Intelligence Agency
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- 51 25X1A [REDACTED]
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- 61 
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66

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Mapping and Geodesy Division
Office of Chief of Engineers
Room 1336, Bldg. 77, Gravelly Point
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68


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Lt. Gen. Marshall S. Carter
Director, National Security Agency
Fort George G. Meade, Maryland


70

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Assistant Director Production
Room 3 W 100, NSA Hdqrs.

71

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72

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istration
Atomic Energy Commission
Germantown, Maryland

73

Mr. William C. Sullivan
Assistant to the Director
Federal Bureau of Investigation
Room 1018, 315 9th St., N.W.

74


Director, NIC
1 E 821, Pentagon
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National Military Command Center
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76,77

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~~118~~ ~~_____~~ Chief, Asia Branch, ORR
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~~Room 3 G 24, Hdqrs. Bldg.~~

~~119-121~~ Special Asst. for Vietnamese Affairs
(SAVA)

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Colonel Patterson
CINCPAC J-2
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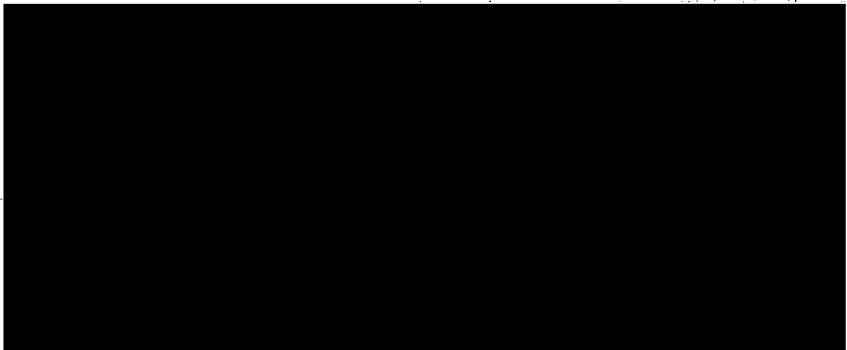




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146

Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow
Air War College
Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama
Via: INR Communications Center
Room 6527, Dept. of State

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- 147 Mr. Melvin L. Manfull
American Embassy, Saigon
Via: INR Communications Center
ATTN: Mr. S. Solomonson
Room 6527, Department of State
(DO/II will forward)
- 148 
- 149 25X1A
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- 151
- 152 Mr. Robert H. Miller Eff. 25 March 1966
Director, Vietnam Working Group
Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs
Department of State
- 153-155 Mr. Robert T. Burke 3/29/66 ✓
State Department Advisor
Ft. Bragg, North Carolina
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Room 6527
Department of State
- 156 Mr. Robert K. German 4/13/66 ✓
Bureau of Intelligence and Research
Office of Research and Analysis for
Soviet Bloc
Room 7422, Department of State
- 157 AUL (AUL3T-66-D3) 4/13/66 ✓
Maxwell AFB, Ala. 36112
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(Revises GB 65-17)

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REPORT NO.

GM 66-3

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12Apr66

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14Apr66

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Map 51386 (from GB 65-17)

15Apr66

20 Repr.

Geo. map. large map

20Apr66

PSD Lalding; Brammell's order

situation map

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GM 66-3
April 9 1966


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13 April 66

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15 April 66

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Date

Instructions for Final Typing

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13 Apr

For Photolith _____

Compilation Branch _____

Editor/Analyst AME/M

13-14 Apr

For Multilith

Map Number _____ Subject _____

Typist (final) MED

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14 April

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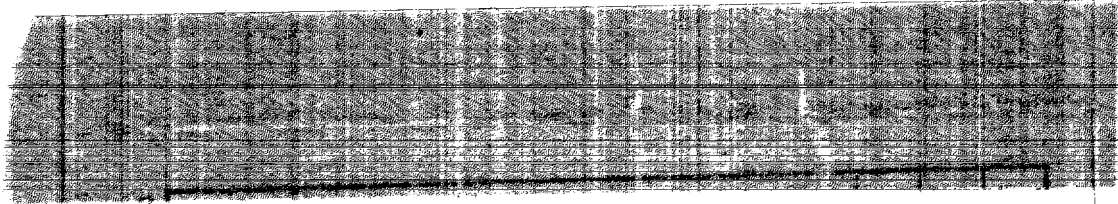
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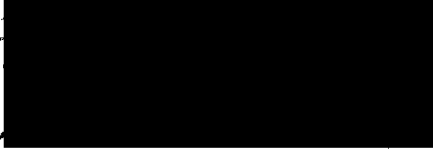
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EFFECTS OF WEATHER
ON TACTICAL AIR
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orig report are still available.

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Revision of GB 65-17


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* Text to be ready for reproduction
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Effects of Weather on Air Operations Over Laos and North Vietnam		61.2286	
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STATEMENT OF PROBLEM		TARGET DATE (issuance)	18 April 1966
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