

1960-61 WestPac Show of Force - Laos

Following the Pathet Lao capture of strategic positions on the central plain of Laos, Seventh Fleet forces (including two CVAs (Lexington and Coral Sea), one CVS (Bennington), and an amphibious force, were ordered to the South China Sea.

During the last three months of 1960 USS Coral Sea operated in various parts of WestPac, but as the crisis in Laos grew she was directed to take up station in the South China Sea. In December 1960 a military coup overthrew the Laotian government and open civil war began. The North Vietnamese, who needed unrestricted access to the road and trail network along the Lao/NVN and Lao/SVN borders to support the Viet Cong in South Vietnam, assisted the Pathet Lao in setting up a Communist enclave in the Plaine des Jars area, and the Soviet Union began providing supplies via airlift to the Pathet Lao. CORAL SEA's airwing, which included Skyraider and Skyhawk ground attack aircraft, provided the basis for immediately available military support for the pro-Western elements in Laos.

"Several crises with Communist China over Taiwan and the crisis in Laos resulted in U.S. Pacific forces being put on high alert several times during the early 1960's prompting CINCPAC to deploy nuclear forces. During 1961, for example, PACOM forces were alerted twice for imminent combat action and combat units were pre-positioned in the Philippines, on Okinawa, or in the South China Sea. Equipment was loaded, and planes and ships stood by ready to move forces into Southwest Asia immediately upon receiving an order to execute war plans. These crises put to the test a new nuclear war plan introduced by the US Navy in the early 1960's; the Single Integrated Operation Plan (SIOP).

On December 31, 1960, for example, forces earmarked to support CINCPAC operations in defense of mainland Southeast Asia against Communist aggression or insurgency in Southeast Asia, were placed on DEFCON 2 (the defense condition immediately below outbreak of war). Three naval task groups, including the two nuclear strike carriers USS Lexington and USS Coral Sea were ordered to depart Okinawa immediately for operations in the South China Sea. Following a week of high alert, the forces were returned to DEFCON3 on January 1961, and ordered no more than FOUR hours steaming distance away. Eventually, on February 25, DEFCON 4 was re-established.

Already the following month, however, tension escalated once more. On March 19th, U.S. forces were placed back on DEFCON 3 in response to a deteriorating of the situation in Laos. This alert condition was raised to DEFCON 2 two days later, and four nuclear carriers were called in."