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A STUDY OF THE POLITICALLY SPECIFIED RULES

OF ENGAGEMENT FOR AIR OPERATIONS

IN SOUTHEAST ASIA, 1965-1967

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RESEARCH REPORT

NO. 3567 BY Robert B. Bigelow

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REPORT NO. 3567

A STUDY
OF
THE POLITICALLY SPECIFIED RULES OF ENGAGEMENT
FOR AIR OPERATIONS
IN
SOUTHEAST ASIA, 1965-1967

by

Robert B. Bigelow, FR21745, 1925-
Lieutenant Colonel, USAF

A RESEARCH REPORT SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY

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by *Robert B. Bigelow*
ROBERT B. BIGELOW, FR21745
Lt Colonel, USAF

MAXWELL AIR FORCE BASE, ALABAMA

May 1968

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

(10) From the beginning of its involvement in Vietnam in 1949, United States military operations in Southeast Asia have been marked by a variety of political and operational constraints, with the majority of the operational restraints having political overtones. The rules established for conduct of air operations have taken a number of forms. These have included geographic and political restraints; limitations on the size, frequency, and altitude of flights; and restrictions on the types of weapons employed. The general constraint policy has been designed to minimize the risk of major escalation while permitting use of enough measured force to check North Vietnamese and Viet Cong support of insurgency in South Vietnam and Laos.

(11) This document will endeavor to follow the chronological changes in the principal rules of engagement covering U. S. air operations in Southeast Asia from 1 January 1965 through 31 December 1967.

(12) At the close of 1964, 2d Air Division published a compilation of the rules of engagement summarizing prohibitive

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(TS) and permissive air actions in force in Southeast Asia at that time. To provide a starting point for this paper, the summary is reproduced below.

Annex 1 - INTERNATIONAL WATERS AND AIRSPACE
OVER INTERNATIONAL WATERS

1. (TS) U. S. Forces are authorized to attack and destroy any vessel or aircraft which attacks or gives positive indication of intent to attack U. S. Forces.
2. (TS) Hot pursuit into territorial waters and airspace as may be necessary and feasible is authorized.
3. (TS) Hostile forces and installations, other than those actively engaged in accordance with these rules, which are encountered outside the confines of RVN and Thailand will not be attacked except as necessary for self-defense and only to that extent.
4. (TS) No pursuit is authorized into CHICOM territorial waters or airspace.

Annex 2 - REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM (RVN)

1. (TS) U. S. Forces are authorized to engage and destroy hostile aircraft encountered within the boundaries of RVN.
2. (TS) Hot pursuit may be conducted as necessary and feasible into North Vietnam (DRV), Laos, Cambodia, and over international waters not to include CHICOM territory or territorial waters.
3. (TS) Hostile forces or installations, other than those actively engaged in accordance with these rules, which are encountered outside the confines of RVN, will not be attacked except as necessary for self-defense and only to that extent.

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Annex 3 - REPUBLIC OF THAILAND

1. (TS) U. S. Forces are authorized to engage and destroy hostile aircraft encountered within the confines of Thailand.
2. (TS) Hot pursuit may be conducted as necessary and feasible into North Vietnam (DRV), Laos, Cambodia, and over international waters not to include CHICOM territory or territorial waters.
3. (TS) Hostile forces or installations, other than those actively engaged in accordance with these rules, which are encountered outside the confines of Thailand, will not be attacked except as necessary for self-defense and only to that extent.

Annex 4a - AIR DEFENSE OF LAOS

1. (TS) U. S. Forces positioned in RVN and Thailand may be used for air defense employment in Laos when authorized by the Commander 2AD or his authorized representative.
 - a. Information on any action taken under this authority will be provided to JCS by flash precedence message.
2. (TS) U. S. air defense forces are authorized to engage and destroy hostile aircraft in Laos. Hot pursuit may be conducted as necessary and feasible over RVN and Thailand.
 - a. Hot pursuit into North Vietnam and Cambodia is not authorized except when actually engaged in combat.
3. (TS) Unless specifically authorized, U. S. air defense forces are not authorized to attack hostile forces or installations, other than those committed against, unless attacked first, and then only to the extent necessary for self-defense.

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4. (TS) Definitions of a hostile aircraft and hostile acts are the same as those defined in paragraph 4 (basic attachment) with the following additions:

a. A hostile aircraft is one which is visually identified, or designated by the U. S. Director of an AOC or his authorized representative, as a Communist Bloc or Cambodian aircraft overflying Laos territory and committing a hostile act.

b. Friendly forces include Air America and Bird and Son aircraft and installations.

Annex 4b - YANKEE TEAM OPERATIONS-LAOS

1. (TS) Medium level escort: Retaliatory fire is authorized if reconnaissance or escort aircraft are endangered by ground fire.

2. (TS) Low level escort: If reconnaissance or escort aircraft are fired upon, retaliatory fire is authorized either on the first pass with the reconnaissance aircraft, or by circling back and conducting subsequent passes.

3. (TS) Low level escort against areas having strong AAA: Escorts are authorized to employ the best operational technique available to minimize risk which, when authorized by JCS, may include attack on known AAA positions in advance of reconnaissance aircraft where suppression of ground fire is considered essential for safety of the reconnaissance aircraft.

Annex 4c - RESCAP OPERATIONS-LAOS

1. (TS) RESCAP aircraft will not enter the area of the distressed crew member(s) unless requested by the Rescue "On Scene Commander" or Rescue Control.

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2. (TS) If rescue helicopters are fired upon, RESCAP aircraft will take action to suppress ground fire after the helicopter(s) departs the area of ground fire.

a. If ground fire is coming from the vicinity of the downed crew member(s), RESCAP aircraft will ensure that return fire will not endanger friendlies on the ground.

b. If the crew on the ground can be seen and ground fire is preventing helicopters from approaching close enough for pick-up, RESCAP aircraft will drop white phosphorous bombs between the enemy positions and the distressed crew member(s) as a screening action for the helicopters.

Annex 4d - AIR DEFENSE CAP LAOS IN CONJUNCTION
WITH RLAF STRIKE/BDA

1. (TS) When requested by the U. S. Ambassador to Laos, CAP is authorized to provide top cover for RLAF T-28 strikes in Laos by CINCPAC TS message 140843Z Oct 64, "Corridor Ops Laos," and IAW JCS 9117, "Definitive Rules of Engagement Applying to Laos." This applies only to authorized pre-briefed targets in Laos and to the provision of navigational assistance to RLAF T-28's and YANKEE TEAM aircraft assigned to obtain BDA of attacked targets. JCS 9117, "Definitive Rules of Engagement Applying to Laos," applies with the following exception: Suppressive or retaliatory fire against AAA is not authorized.

2. (TS) Should CAP aircraft be diverted for RESCAP, current SAR rules will apply.¹

For brevity, nicknames and abbreviations are used throughout this paper to identify missions, organizations, and locations. In order to make their use clear, the entire list is reproduced below.

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1964 SUMMARY

(15) At the end of 1964 United States forces in Southeast Asia were permitted to counter any attack upon them in international waters and to pursue such attackers into territorial waters. Communist China's territory or territorial waters were excluded.

(15) Within the Republic of Vietnam, United States forces were authorized to engage and destroy hostile aircraft and to pursue them into the surrounding areas (except Communist China). United States forces could defend themselves from attack by forces or installations outside the Republic of Vietnam, but they could not go beyond self-defense. (Communist China and her territorial waters were again excluded.)

(15) In the Republic of Thailand, United States Air Force aircraft were authorized to attack and destroy hostile aircraft and to pursue them across the borders of Thailand, except into Communist China. Hostile forces and installations outside of Thailand might not be attacked except in self-defense and only for that purpose.

(15) United States forces located in Thailand and the Republic of Vietnam, but operating in Laos were restricted severely in their actions in Laos. Targets in Laos could be attacked, but

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(TS) only with specific authority of the Commander 2d Air Division or his deputy. Hot pursuit into Thailand and the Republic of Vietnam from Laos was permitted; pursuit into North Vietnam, Cambodia, and Communist China from Laos was forbidden. Additional restrictions covered specific operations in Laos.

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CHAPTER II

THE RULES - 1965

As the tempo of U. S. air operations in SEA increased, the problems associated with such operations also increased. Principal among these problems was the SEA political environment; constant intergovernmental negotiations were necessary to establish prohibitive and permissive actions for U. S. air operations in SEA.

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1965 Summary

(T) During 1965 some of the restrictions on United States air operations in Southeast Asia were lifted, permitting expanded operations.

(T) In January United States aircraft were authorized to be employed in a strike role in SVN under emergency conditions. (See footnote 3)

(T) In March the use of napalm in North Vietnam was first authorized. (See footnote 5)

(T) Air operations were given additional latitude in April. Low-level photographic reconnaissance was permitted (See footnote 10); BLUE SPRINGS drones were authorized to overfly Hanoi (See footnote 20); when approved by AMEMB Vientiane, napalm could be used in Laos (See footnotes 10 and 21); the two-mile buffer zone along the Laos/North Vietnam border was removed.

(T) Authorization to conduct photographic reconnaissance on weather reconnaissance flights was obtained in September (See footnote 12). As of September, Washington approval for pre-planned missions in Laos was no longer required, however, these missions would be coordinated with AMEMB/AIRA Vientiane (See footnote 24).

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Permission was obtained in November to assign BARREL ROLL and STEEL TIGER aircraft alternate missions in the ROLLING THUNDER area (See footnote 25).

(1) Maneuver or firing into Cambodia, under specified conditions, was first authorized in December.

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1966 Summary

(T) Although United States forces became more involved in the struggle in Southeast Asia during 1966 and the tempo of air operations increased, additional restrictions to these operations were removed.

(T) As of mid-1965, reports indicated that the use of napalm was authorized in Laos when approved by AMEMB Vientiane. Rules of engagement for Laotian operations as of January 1966 specifically prohibited such use (See footnote 1). In March, however, following governmental negotiations between United States and Laos officials, the use of napalm was unequivocally authorized in the STEEL TIGER area against RLAF validated targets, if under FAC control. This same authorization was extended to the BARREL ROLL program a short time later (See footnotes 5 and 7).

(T) Greater latitude of operation was obtained in April with the approval to fire or maneuver into Laos in pursuit of SVN objectives or in the right of self-defense. Preplanned activity of this nature required coordination with AMEMB Vientiane and notification to Washington (See footnote 10).

(T) In July authorization was granted to conduct airstrikes in the DMZ against clearly defined military activity (See footnote 16).

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(70) Approval was obtained in November to attack barge traffic, of a specified size, on the Song Ma River in Laos (See footnote 18.)

| 70 Also in November, the prohibited areas of Hanoi-Phuc Yen airfield and Haiphong were reduced to a 10nm and 4nm radius respectively. Air strikes against certain fixed targets in these areas were authorized (See footnote 19).

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CHAPTER IV

THE RULES - 1967

January

In late January 1967, United States policy was established to curtail military offensive operations in Vietnam in observance of the February TET (Vietnamese New Year). CINCPAC, in accordance with JCS directives, issued rules governing this curtailment. The rules, in brief, were:

South Vietnam

- (TS)1. No military offensive operations would be initiated unless enemy actions jeopardized the safety of US, RVN, or FWMA forces; or, unless there was a major enemy effort to resupply or infiltrate into the southern portion of the DMZ and area immediately south of the DMZ.
- (TS)2. COMUSMACV was authorized to react to overt enemy resupply activities constituting a threat to friendly forces.
- (TS)3. Continue aerial reconnaissance and search and rescue operations.

North Vietnam

- (TS)1. Offensive military operations would be suspended for the TET period, unless enemy actions posed an immediate major threat to our forces. CINCPAC could authorize strikes against targets posing such a threat.
- (TS)2. Continue aerial reconnaissance and search and rescue operations.

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Laos

(TS)1. Normal operations would continue.¹

(TS) A full alert posture, and the capability to resume normal operations at any time, would be maintained throughout the period of curtailment. Further, it was reemphasized that commanders retain full responsibility for the safety of their forces and full authority to act in protecting them. Actions suspended by the above rules could be reinstated by commanders acting to protect their forces.²

(73) Also in January, the ROLLING THUNDER 53 program imposed a prohibited area of 10nm radius from the center of Hanoi. No operation involving expenditure of ordnance was permitted in the prohibited circle; however, reconnaissance flights were allowed entry in the area.³

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1967 Summary

(73) Although numerous restrictions on United States air operations in Southeast Asia remained at the close of 1967, additional restraints had been removed during the year.

(73) Rules governing the Hanoi restricted area, relaxed in late 1966, were modified in January to authorize reconnaissance flights within the area.

(73) Control of air strikes in Laos was relaxed in April. Strikes without FAC or radar control were authorized against AW/AAA firing on friendly aircraft and against high intensity searchlights attempting to track mission aircraft.

(73) Further relaxation of control came in May. Air strikes in Laos were approved in Zone I (TIGER HOUND) and Zone II (STEEL TIGER) without FAC control if the strike aircraft position was confirmed positively by radar or TACAN as being in the special operating area.

(73) Starting in September, photographic reconnaissance aircraft were exempt from the 15,000 foot altitude restriction imposed on jet aircraft in the southeastern BARREL ROLL restricted area.

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CHAPTER V

SUMMARY

(7) In mid-1966 the Secretary of Defense pointed out three principles that apparently have governed rules of engagement for air operations in Southeast Asia: (1) Targets have been and will continue to be military. In an effort to limit the conflict, targets will be selected because of their specific nature.

(2) Every effort will be made to avoid civilian casualties and to prevent civilian property damage. (3) The objective of the bombing of North Vietnam is to make its aggression against South Vietnam so difficult and so costly that it cannot be continued by the Government of North Vietnam.¹

(19) The rules of engagement governing air operations in Southeast Asia, which have been outlined in the preceding chapters, are in consonance with these principles. The extensive restrictions which have been imposed were designed to preclude striking other than authorized military targets. Elaborate restrictions such as restricted areas, prohibited areas, and buffer zones have also been established to prevent expansion of the conflict. Until or unless the objectives of the out-country air operations in Southeast Asia are changed, restrictions will continue to be imposed on the application of military power in North Vietnam.

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Before 1965

7. When the United States first undertook to help the South Vietnamese defend themselves against North Vietnamese and Viet Cong aggression, the American role was conceived as that of an advisor. This advisory capacity involved training the South Vietnamese. Americans operating in this capacity were unable to keep apart from operations against the enemy, but their role was as restricted as possible. As the advisory staff was increased and as the conflict in the air moved outside the boundaries of South Vietnam, a body of restrictive rules came into being to govern the role of United States military personnel. As United States participation in out-country operations increased, however, the restrictions were relaxed. The following is a brief summary of that development.

1965

(7. In January, authorization was granted to employ United States aircraft in a strike role in SVN in emergency conditions beyond the capacity of the VNAF or FARMGATE to counter effectively. Concurrence of the United States Ambassador was required, however, prior to exercising such authority.

(7. Air operations were permitted wider latitude as the year progressed: The use of napalm in North Vietnam was authorized;

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(75) Altitude restrictions on photo-reconnaissance were lifted to permit low-level reconnaissance; Photo-reconnaissance could be conducted on weather reconnaissance missions; BLUE SPRINGS drone aircraft were allowed to overfly Hanoi; and, The buffer zone along the Laos-North Vietnam border was removed.

(75) The requirement for Washington to approve all preplanned missions in Laos was lifted in September. All such missions would continue to be coordinated with AMEMB-AIRA Vientiane.

(75) As the year came to an end, permission was obtained to assign BARREL ROLL and STEEL TIGER aircraft alternate missions in the ROLLING THUNDER area, and specific conditions were outlined under which firing or maneuvering into Cambodia was authorized.

1966

(75) The polemics concerning the use of napalm in Laos came to an end in early 1966. Napalm was authorized for use in Laos, when approved by the AMEMB Vientiane, against specific targets, if under FAC control.

(75) Continued and expanded use of Laos territory as a sanctuary by NVN and VC forces resulted in approval to fire or maneuver into Laos in pursuit of SVN objectives or in the right of self-defense. Preplanned activity of this nature required coordination with the AMEMB Vientiane and notification to Washington.

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(TS) Increasing enemy activity in the DMZ resulted in approval to conduct air strikes in the DMZ against clearly defined military activity.

(TS) The prohibited areas of Hanoi/Phuc Yen airfield and Haiphong were reduced to a 10nm and 4nm radius respectively. With the exception of certain fixed targets, strikes within these areas were prohibited.

1967

(TS) As a result of bombing incidents in Laos early in 1967, CINCPAC required all strikes in Laos to be conducted under FAC or radar control. This restraint was relaxed in April allowing strikes without FAC or radar control against AW-AAA firing on friendly aircraft and against high intensity searchlights attempting to track mission aircraft. Further relaxation came in May which allowed air strikes in Laos in Zones I and II without FAC control if the strike aircraft position was confirmed positively by radar or TACAN as being in the special operating area.

(TS) By the end of 1967 it appeared that all major revisions to the rules of engagement had been made. At the close of the year the major remaining restraints were in the form of restricted areas, prohibited areas, buffer zones, ordnance to be employed, and specific target selection.

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(75) It would appear that such self-imposed restrictions on the application of military power are almost certain to remain an essential part of national policy. The nature of the conflict in Southeast Asia and the objective of conveying to the enemy the limited nature of the United States response have required, and will continue to require, careful consideration of the restraints adopted.

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