

Chinese Fire Hits Plane Over Laos

By D. E. Ronk

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VIENTIANE, Jan. 15—An American cargo plane was heavily damaged, apparently by Chinese antiaircraft fire while flying over northern Laos this morning, highly reliable sources here say. The pilot was seriously wounded.

An Air America C-123 on a leaflet dropping mission over a road being built by Chinese engineers in Laos, 175 miles northwest of Vientiane, was hit by Chinese air defenses along the road, the sources say, wounding at least two of the plane's crew including the pilot.

The sources said the plane's crew was dropping leaflets over the Chinese road. The leaflets offered a substantial reward in gold for information leading to the location of wreckage and occupants of another Air America C-123 lost last month in the area and possibly hit by Chinese groundfire.

Air America announced a week ago that emergency search and rescue operations for the downed aircraft with three Americans and one Laotian aboard had been suspended though a routine area alert would be maintained.

Air America is an American airline specializing in contract work for the U.S. government, mainly the CIA. Reliable sources in Vientiane said last month that the C-123 lost near the Chinese road was on a clandestine "drop" mission, carrying supplies to an intelligence gathering base northeast of the road.

Suicidal Flights

Because of groundfire, weather and terrain, flying

over Laos is considered some of the most hazardous in the world by seasoned pilots. Flying over the Chinese road is considered almost suicidal sources say.

"Normally the air space over the Chinese road is strictly "off limits" to American planes, official sources here say, due to a concentration of Chinese antiaircraft weaponry along its length.

Installation of the antiaircraft weapons resulted from unauthorized bombing of the road in 1969, sources here say.

Construction of the road by Chinese engineer crews has been in progress for the past four years, having been agreed to by Laotian Prime Minister Prince Souvanna Phouma.

The road has now reached a point about 30 miles north of Pakbeng on the Mekong River. Beyond its present terminal point, a trail exists that is barely passable for wheeled vehicles, informed U.S. sources say, but they doubt it is being used for transport purposes.

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