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CIA-Backed Laotians Face Hanoi's Best at Long Cheng

By Laurence Stern
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LONG CHENG, Laos — The little twin engine Piper groped through the smoke haze that blotted out the craggy terrain just south of the Plain of Jars.

"It's pretty bad today," said the Greek, "but we're *flying by timed distance so* we don't have to see the ground to know where we are . . . Wait a minute." He leaned forward and shouted to the pilot, "there's Peter Nob over on the right."

The silhouette of a nose-shaped [illegible] outcropping [illegible] through the haze and the plane took a steep dip toward a towering ridgeline which marks the vague boundary between the North Vietnamese infantry and the American-supported Laotian irregular army which have [illegible] in temporary [illegible] northward.

"That's Skyline Ridge," said The Greek. "The North Vietnamese have their anti-air on the other side."

Another sharp dip and suddenly a valley popped into view, dotted with shacks, roads and a tiny airstrip. The shacks were mostly deserted by the villagers who fled last month's North Vietnamese offensive and are still hiding out some 15 kilometers southward.

"Long Cheng, announced The Greek.

In the seat behind us, Kayak looked up from his book. He is a tow-headed American with an earnest face who might pass for a scout leader in his olive twill uniform were it not for the ammunition and rifle and the .45 revolver that he wore along with it.

The two Air American pilots *skimmed the* Piper Baron nimbly downwind along the hillsops to the landing strip at Long Cheng, the once supersecret headquarters base of the tribal guerrilla army organized and financed by the Central Intelligence Agency and fleshed with Meo, Yao, as well as highland Lao volunteers, conscripts and confused-looking children.

Kayak and The Greek and the flight crew are part of the low profile American presence that provides the guns, ammunition, helicopters, transports, air strikes, medical evacuation—in short the wherewithal—that give the "friendlies" their plausibility as a military force.

Though much of the secrecy surrounding the CIA role in Laos has been lifted here under investigative prodding from Congress and instructions from the administration, there are still reminders that American participation is somewhat of a political liability.

"You can take all the pictures you want of the Lao," I was counselled, "but please, we don't want any photographs with Americans."

I agreed and [illegible]

Of the group, Gen. Vang Pao, the [illegible] Meo commander of the irregulars, greeted his visitor with a surprisingly shy smile and handshake. His two visiting sons, Pan Su, 3, and Cha Lerne, 4, clowned and romped with their father's staff officers to his unalloyed delight.

Vang Pao is famous for his tough, soldierly talk, but today he reflected the seriousness of the state of affairs in the Plain of Jars.

"The North Vietnamese have artillery and they have tanks. Their artillery is big, much bigger than we have. They have a 27 kilometer range and ours is 15 kilometers. Out there on the Plain of Jars we have no artillery at all. We have very few people and not enough material. It is getting very difficult to hold the situation."

Haze Hurts

"Yes, we have American air strikes. But this weather haze." He raised his hand to simulate an airplane and held out the other hand to represent the ground. "The airplanes can't see and if they come down to clear for support operations, they either crash in the mountains or can get shot down." The upper hand smacked flatly against the lower hand which trailed toward the floor.

"The American B-52s did a very good job for us. We had [illegible] last week on Skyline Ridge." He gestured beyond Skyline Ridge. "Maybe we will have to call for more B-52 strikes.

"But the best thing would be to get talks started again among the nations that participated in the Geneva Conference. *We must have the* neutralization of Indochina. They must get together and talk just once more."

In the past 10 years, the fighting has decimated the ranks of Vang Pao's Meos. His guerrillas once were almost 100 per cent Meo. But now they comprise less than 50 per cent of the force. The Meo mountain people have borne the brunt of the fighting and civilian casualties as well as the dislocation.

"We have some irregulars up here now from Saravane in the south. But they cannot walk in the mountains. They slow down our operations. A march that should take three days takes them [illegible]. We should [illegible]

For the edification of some of the highest-ranking Americans in Vietnam, Vang Pao's guerrillas are facing in the North Vietnamese units across Skyline Ridge [illegible] have the best light infantry in the world.

Although road- and ground-bound, they are using newly supplied Soviet 130 millimeter cannons, the longest range artillery piece on either side in the war, with *a devastating effect*. They are employing Soviet-supplied tanks as mobile gun platforms.

To bedevil American air reconnaissance, the Communists not only have succeeded in camouflaging their guns, but have fashioned dummy replicas of the guns visible from the air and can simulate secondary explosions with gunpowder firecrackers.

The enemy, declares U.S. Ambassador G. McMurtrie Godley, is a very formidable [illegible]. Godley, who monitors the military [illegible] with a fervor that has earned him the nickname "Field Marshal Godley," concedes that the enemy's use of artillery and mortars *is uncanny*.

At Long Cheng one day last week there was a continuous shuttling of American helicopters, C-123 transports, observation craft and Laotian-flown T-28 jets over [illegible] *heavily fortified* permanently [illegible] fixed bellets on the other side of the ridge.

The C-123, a faithful workhorse that must land and take off on abysmally short runways, is the key to the *mobility of men and supplies* for the irregular army. Conspicuously posted inside the planes are signs in Thai, Laotian, Vietnamese and English warning that "the transportation of opium and other narcotic products is *absolutely forbidden on this* aircraft." The signs also admonish that all passengers are subject to search and removal by the Air America crews if they are found to be carrying opium.

Bracing for Attack

About the strip there was evidence of the most recent North Vietnamese offensive, at the end of January, *that penetrated into* the Long Cheng Valley. There were spent cartridges, rocket casings and shell fragments.

"They got up to that point," a Laotian air controller said, pointing to the [illegible] boundaries of the airport. "We [illegible] to chase them out."

Now Vang Pao and his irregulars and the Americans are bracing for a new assault across the ridge, said Vang Pao. Eight regiments of North Vietnamese are organized for a new push.

A two-week-old spoiling operation directed against the North Vietnamese supply lines shows no sign of having seriously breached the Communist columns.

In the drowsy capital of Vientiane to the south, meanwhile, the ingrown diplomatic community gossips and backbites and entertains and no sound of war is ever heard. One night last week Premier Souvanna Phouma attended a bridge dinner at the Australian embassy and smilingly reminisced with a similie perhaps not altogether original that President Nixon's visit to Peking had broken down a great wall.

Souvanna is making new overtures for talks with his half-brother, Pathet Lao leader Prince Souphanouvong. The first secretary of the North Vietnamese embassy, Nguyen Van Than, has been bombarded by visits from Western newsmen applying hopefully for visas to Hanoi. Than managed to teach himself English with language records and assiduous reading and spends engrossing hours of conversation with the correspondents.

Tea And Smiles

He is asked about President Nixon's visit to Peking, and he smiles and pours a visitor more tea. "The Chinese have given us much assistance," he finally *replies in measured cadence*. "The Russians have also helped us greatly. But the solution to the war in Indochina will have to be reached by the Vietnamese people."

The resident Western *press in* Vientiane carries on its own weekly skirmish with American military spokesmen over the war to which most of them are denied access.

Several days ago a U.S. colonel, the regular briefer, stood before a dozen reporters and the adversary tensions were high. The colonel delivered a region-by-region briefing of enemy casualties with numbers *killed* and wounded, as reported to him by Laotian army sources.

Finally one newsman blurted impatiently:

"Colonel, do you take these figures seriously?"

"No," he replied, "I don't. But I am obliged to pass them out. I will not act as a filter."

"But we come to these briefings in the hope that you will be a filter."

"I am a military spokesman," said the attache, his *voice tightening*. "*I am a* guest of the host government. And the average Laotian soldier is as guilty of exaggeration in the heat of battle as the average American soldier."

And the newsmen went off to write their weekend military roundups.

Traffic in Secrets

In Vientiane, where Chinese, Soviet, U.S., Pathet Lao, North Vietnamese and other diplomats commingle in an atomsphere *of gossipy* social congestion, there is a lively traffic in each other's official and personal secrets.

It is known, for example, who in the Soviet embassy is the principal KGB (secret police) operative. It is also an open secret in the diplomatic circuit who the CIA station chief is and which ambassador from what nonaligned country is his next door neighbor.

Secrecy in Vientiane is mainly an export commodity and it is safe to say that the North Vietnamese apparatus knows more about the local U.S. apparatus than most American congressmen.

The major outside powers in the Laotian war still conspire to maintain the tattered fiction of compliance with Laotian neutrality under the 1962 Geneva Agreements.

The North Vietnamese have never acknowledged the presence of some 90,000 troops in the northern provinces and along the infiltration *trails into* South Vietnam and Cambodia.

President Nixon has, since 1970, been more candid about the extent of American involvement in Laos. Nonetheless, the CIA *paramilitary* advisers here are still described with such antiseptic euphemisms as "case workers" and "field technical consultants." And the brunt of the American-supported war is still being fought by the CIA's clandestine irregulars and Thai-based U.S. tactical support air craft on battle grounds almost wholly inaccessible to journalists.

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