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U.S. Plane Is Reported Shot Down Over Laos

VIENTIANE, Laos (AP) — An Air America C123 cargo plane has been shot down near the Mekong River town of Thakhek, reliable sources said yesterday.

Two American pilots and a Filipino engineer are listed as missing and believed dead, the informants added. The report could not be confirmed in Vientiane, where a news blackout has been imposed on military activities. However, word of the loss quickly spread among pilots flying for the airline, which is under contract to the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency.

According to the pilots the twin-engine plane was hit Friday by 37mm antiaircraft fire.

"It was shot right out of the sky," said one pilot. "They heard, 'Mayday! Mayday! Mayday!' And then a kind of groan like 'Oh, hell . . . ' and that's all they heard."

One parachute was reported to have been seen.

The reported loss of the plane dramatized the rapidly worsening military situation throughout Laos where North Vietnamese-led Pathet Lao forces are making a determined bid for territory before a cease-fire is signed.

(American warplanes struck Communist troops attacking and kept up raids over Laos, the Pacific Command announced, United Press International said.)

(The raids by tactical fighter-bombers and B52 stratoformers have been conducted over Laos daily since the cease-fire went into effect in

Vietnam two weeks ago. But the command's report of strikes in Cambodia was only the second day they have been disclosed by the command.)

Thakhek, 150 miles southeast of Vientiane, has been rocketed several times in the past two weeks. Most of the population has fled across the Mekong River into Thailand or into the countryside.

If the Pathet Lao were to seize the town, which is about nine miles from the U.S. Air Force headquarters across the Mekong in Thailand, it would effectively cut Laos in half.

The town lies on Highway 23, the main north-south highway.

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