

FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS STAFF

PROGRAM Chronolog

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REPORT ON LAOS

GARRICK UTLEY: Most Americans may not realize it, but as the United States tries to extricate itself from Vietnam, there is a continuing and deepening problem in Laos. That tiny kingdom's sovereignty, neutrality, and integrity, guaranteed by 1962 Geneva Accord, are in shreds.

Today almost two-thirds of Laos is under communist control. Chinese engineers, protected by Chinese antiaircraft guns, are building this important road which runs from China, through Laos, to the Mekong River on the border. And North Vietnamese troops hold large areas near the Ho Chi Minh Trail. And they are fighting in division strength throughout the middle portion of Laos.

The United States is also deeply involved in Laos. But until recently that involvement was shrouded in secrecy. Apparently the United States did not want to be accused of violating the Geneva Accord, which the communists ignored from the start.

To conceal this involvement the United States has funneled money to the CIA through the AID -- the Agency for International Development in Laos. Money designated for humanitarian purposes really helps support a secret guerilla army. That was revealed by Senator Edward Kennedy's committee on refugee problems earlier this week.

The secret war is getting too big to hide. It has escalated into a major conflict. And fighting on the American side is one of the oddest collections of soldiers, secret agents, pilots, and children that the war in Indochina has produced.

BOB ROGERS: (Film narration) This is one of America's allies in Southeast Asia. This young man is eleven years old. He carries an M-16 rifle. He tells me he's used it four times already in combat against the North Vietnamese.

This year's biggest battle in Indochina is raging, not in Vietnam, but here in the mountains of Laos. It pits North Vietnamese Regulars against a secret irregular army, organized, advised, supported, and paid by the Central Intelligence Agency.

The key to the problem is the North Vietnamese.

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This is the famous Skyline Ridge, the keystone of the defensive position at Long Tieng. We're getting mortar fire in here right now from the North Vietnamese divisions which surround this place, which is why everybody is staying so low. In the past few minutes we've had mortar rounds land within fifteen yards from here.

(Sounds of battle)

ROGERS: Though many of its recruits are under sixteen, the secret army has been the toughest force opposing the communists in Laos. Now the North Vietnamese are making an all out effort to destroy it. This week there is still heavy fighting around Long Tieng.

The secret army now has men from various ethnic groups. But it began among the Meo hill tribes. The Meo, or Mung, as they call themselves, are fiercely independent people who thrive in the rugged highlands. Today most are refugees, clinging to those patches of the mountain still under government control. Despite ten years of defeat and suffering, most have remained staunch allies of America. Today with other hill tribes they are still the backbone of the secret army, and make it the closest thing to a people's army on the government side.

They have paid dearly for their commitment. Their camps are built of the debris of war. They move constantly, shifting locations as the war sweeps back and forth across their mountains. At each new spot they dig in to await the next attack. Where there is time between moves they still plant their opium poppy.

For centuries opium was their only cash crop. But the war has reduced the crop to the point where the Mung smoke most of it themselves.

This is Bum Long (?), forty-five miles from the North Vietnamese border, and the only major secret army base left in the far north. To get here means a long flight over enemy territory, with the pilots dodging anti aircraft positions. The only link with the outside world is the airstrip. And it is frequently closed by enemy shell fire.

There are six thousand people here. Only a few hundred are soldiers advised by the CIA. The rest are women and children.

Bum Long is called The Fortress in the Sky. And it's a fortress under siege. The people spend most of their time repairing the damage from the last enemy attack, and digging

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deeper for the next one. The local Mung commander requires each family to dig and maintain its own bunker.

Casualties have been high, including hundreds of civilians. Manpower is so scarce that some positions are guarded only by straw dummies. Because of its strategic location, the Mung and their CIA advisors are determined to hold Bum Long as long as possible. That may not be much longer.

Each year the enemy assaults become heavier. The defenses are littered with the bones of North Vietnamese soldiers who have died here. This week the secret army has been using these positions to attack enemy supply routes. The object, to relieve pressure on Long Tieng. If Long Tieng falls, Bum Long will almost certainly be next.

For years this compound in the village of Long Tieng was one of the most secret spots on earth. This was headquarters for the CIA and the secret army in Laos. It was a little bit of America, crammed with sophisticated electronic gear. Journalists called it "Spook Heaven." This year Spook Heaven has become part of the front line. The CIA has moved to a new location.

We talked to a CIA man assigned to the secret army. The agency calls him a Case Officer. He's a civilian, but in any other war he'd be called a military advisor.

Just what do you CIA men do up here?

AGENT: Well first of all, let me set the record straight. We do not command any of the combat troops. Our primary role is one of supporting the indigenous Lao forces in MR 2. That support involves a number of things. Some of it is technical advice, a great deal of it is training, it involves advice. Our advice is one of keeping them informed on what is possible with the resources that are available.

ROGERS: What are we trying to accomplish up here?

AGENT: Well the primary aim of the United States government in Laos is to assist the people of Laos to have the kind of government that they want to have. Our job is not one of telling them how to run the war, of having the war become our war. Our task is one of working with them, training them, advising them, letting them make the decisions that they believe are in their national interests. So far we have been able to conduct this with very, very few Americans.

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ROGERS: The man who commands most of the secret army is General Vang Pao. He is a Mung tribesman who worked closely with the CIA in organizing the hill people. Today, along with his secret army role, he also commands all Lao forces in the most crucial military region.

We found him helping his soldiers repair shell holes in the airstrip near his headquarters. He is definitely not an armchair general. He's part warlord, part tribal father figure, and the most effective military leader in Laos today.

When the war permits Vang Pao spends most of his time with other tribal leaders. The Mung look to him for leadership in politics as well as fighting. But in the tribal hierarchy Vang Pao is not a dictator, but a sort of first among equals. Decisions are reached only after the traditional long discussion with other clan chiefs.

But Vang Pao's favorite spot is the front line. Some of his American advisors complain that VP, as they call him, spends too much time in the fox holes and not enough time plotting grand strategy. But the fact is, the soldiers, especially the Mung soldiers, fight best when VP is around. And despite his advisors, Vang Pao is not about to change his style, even when his arrival attracts enemy mortar fire.

Vang Pao likes nothing better than playing the role of an Oriental George Patton, and personally directing counter battery fire.

General, what have we got over in that position?

GENERAL VANG PAO: One-twenty mortar.

ROGERS: A one-twenty mortar?

GENERAL VANG PAO: That makes it interesting.

ROGERS: We're up on Skyline Ridge, which in terms of the war in Laos, is likely to become a legend like Heartbreak Ridge in Korea or Hamburger Hill in Vietnam. These holes we're sitting in right now up until about forty-eight hours ago were occupied by one of the best North Vietnamese regiments there is. All these positions off to our front here are occupied by the North Vietnamese.

The secret army was not designed to slug it out with North Vietnamese divisions. Their performance at Long Tieng has surprised most experts. But the fighting there is heavier than ever. And no one knows how long they can keep it up.

Casualties in this year's battles have been the heaviest ever. They are evacuated in American furnished planes and helicopters. Most of those who survive are treated in hospitals paid for and run by the American Agency for International Development. The dead are also flown out, wrapped in American body bags. The lightly wounded can expect to be back in the front lines quickly. They can also expect a visit from General Vang Pao, who tries to make sure they get the best care available.

Frequently he is accompanied by an aide de camp with a briefcase full of money. Vang Pao and his men receive their money direct from the CIA, bypassing the corruption that plagues the Lao regular army. By Lao standards they are very well paid. Critics have suggested that the rice and money from America are the secret army's main motivation.

MAN: No amount of money or rice or medical treatment is going to get any young man to stand up and fight the North Vietnamese and run the very high risk of being killed or maimed for life. Because remember, these are irregulars. They're very much like we had in the Revolutionary War in our own country. They volunteered in, and they can volunteer out. The Mung attitude is that this is his home. They're here and fighting because this is their homeland. They lose this and there is no place else for them to go.

ROGERS: But each year the Mung homeland shrinks. The battles are bigger, the casualty lists longer. And there are signs of weariness among the hill tribes.

Vang Pao spends a lot of time visiting the isolated Mung settlements, trying to boost his people's morale. Except for the small local garrison, there are usually few men present. They are all away at the front. One of his unpleasant duties is to inform wives and mothers that their loved ones are dead or missing.

This week some units of the secret army refused to continue the fight at Long Tieng. But they were not hill people. The Mung are a tough and stoic race. And as long as Vang Pao is willing to lead, they seem willing to follow.

To continue the fight the secret army has to look beyond Laos for recruits. These soldiers are Thai volunteers, recruited and trained in Thailand by the CIA, which also pays them. The Lao, and particularly the hill tribes, have been bled white by the war. They have simply run out of manpower. The result is about eight thousand Thai volunteers presently fighting in Laos. Some Senators claim this violates a Congressional ban on mercenaries being hired to fight in Southeast Asia. Both the Lao and Thai governments are very touchy on the subject. The volunteers have taken heavy casualties in the recent fighting.

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Where are you from?

SOLDIER: I'm from Bangkok.

ROGERS: This is a long way from Bangkok. How long have you been here?

SOLDIER: One year.

ROGERS: You've been here one year.

SOLDIER: Yes.

ROGERS: Do you fight the North Vietnamese very much?

SOLDIER: Yes. I work here one year, but I think it's very long, same same ten years.

ROGERS: One year here seems like ten years. Do you like it here.

SOLDIER: No, I don't like.

TRANSLATOR: The entire northeastern region of Thailand has a population of about eighteen million Lao. Therefore, these Lao -- that is, these Thai of Lao descent -- have a reason to defend Laos as well. This is readily understandable. It is not Thai regulars that we have now, but volunteers.

QUESTION: His Highness is satisfied that this does not infringe on Laos' position in the world as a neutralist country?

TRANSLATOR: This is no problem. They are volunteers who come to fight, as was the case, as you know, in France with the Foreign Legion, which includes individuals from all nationalities. So why not in our case.

ROGERS: Whatever the diplomatic niceties, the Thai volunteers are absolutely necessary. Without them, the secret army and Laos too would probably collapse. Even if that happened, Vang Pao says the Mung will fight on.

TRANSLATOR: Even if the North Vietnamese could take over all our territory, we will take to the jungle to carry on the fight against them no matter how long it takes -- fifty or even one hundred years. We will keep on fighting until the North Vietnamese get out of our land.

ROGERS: These days Vang Pao seldom sees his home or his children. He has been through crises before, but this year the military situation is worse than ever. He's troubled for the future of his children. But he is confident that American will never simply abandon the hill people.

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UTLEY: Given the mood of America, the CIA is hardly a popular organization. But in assessing the role of the Agency in Laos we should remember certain things. It was given the job of organizing a secret army by the United States government. We wanted to preserve the fiction of our adherence to the Geneva Accords while preventing the North Vietnamese from overrunning Laos. The CIA did the job with a minimum of American personnel, money, and casualties. For eight years its ragtag irregulars have fought off some of the best trained and equipped troops in the world. The CIA performed its mission well. So well in fact, that future American governments might be tempted to launch the Agency on similar ventures elsewhere, perhaps as in Laos, without the knowledge and consent of any of us.

There are other American civilians involved in the secret war. In a moment we'll look at them.

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UTLEY: The American effort to fight a secret war has produced some strange situations. The Director for the Agency for International Development has admitted that CIA men use AID humanitarian health programs as a cover in Laos. There are also reports that AID public health funds are being used to provide medical care for CIA irregular soldiers and their dependents. In some cases, CIA men even pose as AID workers.

In Laos itself most Americans refer to the CIA and its people by the nickname "Brand X." And working for both AID and Brand X is a most peculiar airline called Air America. Air America is a private charter company which has been flying mysterious missions in Asia for twenty years. Its planes parachuted supplies to the besieged garrison at Dien Bien Phu. Today Laos is one of its biggest operations.

Another major charter company in Laos is called Continental Air Services. It's smaller than Air America, but does the same job. Between them the companies share about thirty million dollars in government contracts. Their pilots are civilians, their planes are unarmed. But without them the secret war would be impossible.

ROGERS: For the civilian charter pilots the war begins at dawn when the engines start turning at Dien Tsien (?) Airport. Air America alone carries twelve million pounds of cargo and nearly ten thousand people out of Dien Tsien each month. Their destinations are diverse and often dangerous.

PILOT: Well now, on the unfriendly activity, which is right off to the south, I don't see the same marks that were on the previous chart. But there again it looks like perhaps we've lost that unfriendly activity.

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ROGERS: There are very few milk runs left in Laos. At pilot briefings the latest reports on enemy anti aircraft positions are as important as the weather.

Pilots say the only thing worse than flying in Laos is trying to land there. By local standards this dirt strip set between mountains is a major airport. It is now the secret army's headquarters in northern Laos. Big planes bring the cargo in, and from here smaller planes and helicopters haul it to a hundred different sites in the surrounding mountains. These days much of the cargo is ammunition, most of it parachuted to what the pilots call friendlies.

The control tower is primitive, and there are no navigation aids. Yet between daylight and dusk this strip handles nine hundred takeoffs and landings each day.

Some of the planes end up like this. As one pilot said, Air America is not exactly like flying for Pan American out of JFK.

This was one of Air America's major operation centers until the enemy overran it. The combination of danger, superb flying, and exotic locale, plus a tradition of secrecy, has led to some highly sensational reporting about Air America. Its pilots have been called America's flying Foreign Legion, and the Lord Jim's of Laos.

What is Air America?

MAN: Well, it's the same thing today that it always has been. That is, a charter air carrier whose major customer is the United States government. And it's nothing more or less than that. The average age, by the way, is forty-three out here. So that they're not a bunch of apple cheeked youngsters looking for big thrills. Most of them have already had their thrills.

PILOT: Each week it gets worse. As an example, we're within fifteen minutes now of an area that last year was like a rest center. This year, as you know, we've already had one airplane shot down.

ROGERS: What's the worst thing about flying out here? The mountains, the weather, or the bad guys?

PILOT: It's a combination of all three. We have three distinct flying seasons -- it's either smokey, windy, or raining. And any one of the three, combined with the enemy, creates a situation that none of us like.

ROGERS: So you don't really have a happy season?

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PILOT: No.

ROGERS: How long do you plan to keep this up?

PILOT: Each year I say it's my last one. This is my seventh year now.

ROGERS: (Words inaudible)

PILOT: No, not really. It's a big influence, of course. I have two daughters to put through school yet, out of my six. So even though I'm retired, I still have to work.

ROGERS: Do you like the guys you work with?

PILOT: They're a real bunch of pros. Every one of them.

MAN: We have an extreme sense of comradeship and a sense of competition that I think is not excelled in any profession.

MAN: Let's say the US government put, let's say, five hundred thousand troops into North Vietnam to accomplish the same job that we're accomplishing here with a handful of, so to speak, American professionals.

MAN: We have a commodity to sell, and we can't sell it any place in the world except right here.

MAN: If you want to be mundane about it, take this war away, or if we quit -- you talk about why we do it. If most of us went back to the United States we would be a dirty old man.

(Laughter)

MAN: It is a different operation, I think, than you'll find any place in the world. But on the other hand, as far as professional standards go, we do meet the requirements of any major airline, regardless of where it is throughout the world.

MAN: It is becoming tougher. It hasn't reached the point where we're giving up by any stretch of the imagination. All of us are very talented. Very, very talented. And we can avoid what they have given us so far. But it is becoming a little more difficult for us to do.

MAN: We are really all -- most are highly experienced, qualified people, and we've gone through this thing before and it's a thrill.

MAN: It's a business. It is not a romantic, devil-may-care
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we weren't there to carry them, they'd die. And about the time you participated in some of these uplifts of seriously wounded men you get the feeling that there's a reason for being here. We move refugees by the thousands. And this again is a very heart warming experience for a pilot and those of us on the ground because if we didn't move them they'd be overrun and made prisoners and made bearers by the opposition. And we carry rice, we carry food to the people, medical supplies.

ROGERS: Rice is dropped in eighty pound sacks. Nearly one-quarter of this country's population are displaced persons. Most have fled the communists. Some have fled our bombing of the communists. A quarter of a million people are outright refugees, existing on American handouts. Over a hundred thousand depend on aerial deliveries for survival.

Supervising the relief program is a handful of American AID men. They spend most of their time in remote locations like this. It's a measure of the loyalty of the hill tribes that in ten years of wandering unarmed through the communist infested mountains not a single AID man has been betrayed to the enemy.

(Men speaking in Lao)

ROGERS: They are not CIA agents. Their job is to help refugees. But even this function is indirectly linked to the war. If enough refugees flee the enemy, the communists may be left trying to conduct a people's war without people.

The AID program also runs hospitals. This one treats over forty thousand people a year. Many of them are flown in by Air America and Continental. This little girl was hit by grenade fragments in a remote village. Few Americans object to this sort of American involvement in Laos. But the General Accounting Office reports that much of the AID money Congress thought it was appropriating for civilian health care was being used for medical support of the secret army. Until recently, at least, even deceiving the United States Congress was considered a legitimate tactic of the secret war.

The latest North Vietnamese offensive has already created fifty thousand new refugees. Most of them are Mung tribesmen. And for most of them this is the third time they've been uprooted. At their last location AID had provided them with homes, schools, and a dispensary. Now they are back to square one, huddled on a bleak hilltop, sheltered by parachutes and scrap lumber. They are both tired of the war and nervous about a peace settlement that would abandon them.

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In the meantime they depend on the charter planes for everything. And for the pilots of those planes, landing strips like this are becoming riskier every day.

Has this increase in enemy activity and the loss of real estate, has this effected the morale of the pilots?

MAN: No, I think it's probably made them more cautious. It can ruin your whole day if you land at somebody else's airstrip, or one that you think is friendly and you find out it isn't the hard way.

ROGERS: That very thing recently happened to one Air America pilot. His wrecked aircraft still sits like a squashed bug on the enemy held airstrip.

PILOT: People on the airplane talked to people on the ground, and they said everything was secure so I landed. The fellow I had with me is known to me as Swamp Rat, and suggested that I shut the engines down. So I turned the engine off. And this was one of the first mistakes I made that day. The minute that the prop stopped turning they started shooting at us. The first ones put holes in the machine, and the Swamp Rat was already outside the airplane, and he hollered at me, let's go. And this didn't take a lot of encouragement since the airplane was done -- unwound. I leaped out of it too, and I still was laboring under the illusion that when it's all over I'm going to get back into my machine and fly out of there. This is what aviators do. They don't walk off. They fly.

ROGERS: Two days after losing his plane, and nearly losing his life, Jim Russell was flying again.

The first battle of Long Tieng was reaching its climax, and only the performance of the charter planes enabled the secret army to turn almost certain defeat into at least a temporary standoff.

Only helicopters could land to pluck out the seriously wounded. North Vietnamese artillery was shelling the airstrip. Enemy snipers were firing up at the planes. Enemy machineguns on the hills were firing down at the planes. But the friendlies were out of water and ammunition. So the planes went in anyway. They shared the narrow airspace with fighter bombers, trying to bomb the enemy off the ridge line. To the charter pilots it was just another mission.

MAN: It goes in spurts. Last February, for example, when we didn't have so much anti aircraft, we had twenty-seven airplanes hit in one month.

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ROGDRS: Twenty-seven airplanes hit in one month?

MAN: Yes. This December, when the flak was more intense, we had twenty-four airplanes hit. However, the hits can be more serious because you're dealing with a larger caliber of weapon.

PILOT: But that is part of the challenge that is part of why we are here. And it's not a death wish by any stretch of the imagination. It is a little competition with the other side. And try to survive. And use my talents against their talents, and usually it wins.

ROGERS: The favorite watering spot for the odd ball warriors of this odd ball war is the Purple Porpoise Bar. The clientele includes spooks, military attaches, pilots, and diplomats.

The pub keeper is a misplaced Englishman who calls himself Monty Banks. He gives away nearly as much booze as he sells. And to make sure his clients can discuss their clandestine business in private, he frequently places his saloon off limits to journalists.

(Sound of singing)

MONTY BANKS: The Americans that are in this town are the best Americans I've yet met. The people that walk into my bar -- the Americans -- collectively are human beings who love humanity.

UTLEY: Dare devil pilots dropping American rice and ammunition are one aspect of the war in Laos. Warplanes dropping American bombs are another and even more controversial issue. We'll look at that side of the war in a moment.

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UTLEY: One of the tragic ironies of the war in Laos is that in this age of ideologies this war is probably less a question of ideology than of simple geography. The strength of the local communist Pathet Lao has actually decreased in recent years. But North Vietnamese regiments and cadres have more than made up the difference.

We too have escalated our efforts. Laos was once described as a warm green paradise where all a man needed to live was a small knife to peel bananas and a large knife to kill pigs. But today the knives have been replaced by tanks and heavy artillery on the enemy's side, and bombs and napalm on our side.

ROGERS: Legend has it that whenever the city of Vientiane was threatened by invaders the monks of this temple would pray and beat the sacred drum to summon forth a dragon which protected the city. Today the very existence of Laos is threatened. But there is no dragon to help.

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Even in the best of times Laos was a fragile country. The only unifying force is allegiance to the king. Even the communists pay lip service to the throne. But that doesn't keep them from shelling the Royal Capitol. After nearly one billion dollars in American military assistance, the Lao regular army still leaves a lot to be desired. It does not fight well, but it has been fighting a long time.

Over one-third of these military academy cadets are children of men killed in action.

For the most part the children of the rich and powerful don't have to worry about the army. They don't seem to worry much about the war either. Millions of dollars in American aid have helped make Vientiane a swinging town. Usually only those without money or political connections end up in the army. They are poorly paid and usually poorly led. They have little motivation. Many units have become experts at avoiding confrontation with the enemy.

The main military factor in staving off the collapse of what is left of Laos is a massive bombing campaign. It involves Navy and Air Force jets, including B-52's, as well as the US supported Royal Lao Air Force. Most of the strikes in Laos are directed by American Air Force officers called Fac's, or forward air controllers. Accompanied by a Laotian observer they cruise over enemy territory in a light plane, armed only with smoke rockets. Their task is to locate and mark the target for the bombers. It's probably the most dangerous job in Laos.

No one in Washington or Vientiane will say just how many bombs are being dropped, or exactly where. But the Fac's say civilian targets are avoided.

MAN: We're reasonably sure that a hundred percent of them are military targets. We have a system of assurances. We carry a Laotian to talk to Laotians that don't speak English. And they verify our targets. There are certain places that are just obviously unfriendly. And any of the targets, trucks, boats, supplies that we find are military targets. And such targets where civilians may live, like villages or hootches somewhere, we stay strictly away from these.

ROGERS: Well the North Vietnamese are pretty smart people. Knowing you're trying to avoid civilian targets, they concentrate their supply efforts in a civilian type area. What happens then?

MAN: Of course, they've got that one system, and they've used it all the time. They put supplies in villages and we can't

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hit. And of course, the Laotians fly the Laotian airplanes, and there are occasions where if they deem the target is important enough then Laotians -- strictly Laotians with no American involvement whatsoever -- hit targets that they consider to be of vital importance.

ROGERS: The Royal Lao Air Force is an American created byproduct of the secret war. It's trained, equipped, and advised by Americans. And in a country where fighting spirit is hard to find, the Air Force has become an elite force. The pride of the Air Force are these fighter bomber pilots.

Actually, their fighter bombers are T-28's, originally built as trainers during the Korean War. But they are rugged, easy to maintain, and carry a surprisingly large load of bombs, rockets, and napalm.

With forty T-28's, the Lao Air Force flies up to four thousand missions a month. The pilots quickly become veterans. They are paid about fifty-five dollars a month, plus a bonus of one dollar and sixty cents per combat mission. But any standards their losses have been heavy. The sons of two Laotian Cabinet ministers are among the pilots who have been killed.

This year's enemy offensives have put new strains on the Air Force. There are more missions and more enemy anti aircraft guns. For the pilots we flew with recently, it was the fifth mission of the day. Except for a short lunch break, they had already spent seven hours in their cockpits.

There were five strike planes on the mission, all of them loaded with a complete assortment of lethal ordnance. I flew in the back seat of a strike plane. NBC News cameraman Charles Feckity (?) flew in the American piloted Fac plane which was pinpointing the targets for the strike.

We've just got the targets marked here, and now we're going to try to go in and clobber it.

The target was a Laotian Army outpost that had been overrun the night before.

We've just completed our first pass. We're going around again now.

After a day's flying there is happy hour -- often a mixture of American whiskey and Lao dancing. One pilot told me the whiskey helps him forget the twelve point seven -- he was referring to the twelve point seven heavy machine guns which are one of the communists' favorite and most deadly anti aircraft weapons.

PILOT: That thought always exists in the back of your mind. Now you never know, of course, when somebody is going to pull in a twelve seven. Whenever I go into a new area I'm always careful to at least stay above the effective range of a twelve seven. And then today it was particularly true because I had no idea what to expect. Because the friendlies had reported trucks moving into the area, and they could have been bringing in anything. So I started out in the area fairly high. But they don't have a tendency to shoot at Fac's so much unless they're reasonably sure that they can get them. Once they give away their position then we call in too many air strikes on them. So they generally stay away until they are sure they can either get a Fac or else they can get the strike aircraft.

ROGERS: The forward air controllers have become a special breed. Their uniform usually consists of blue jeans, camouflage survival vests, and a colt revolver. They are mostly Captains and Lieutenants in their early twenties. They are proud of their work. This one, George Towsley (?), graduated from the Air Force Academy in 1969. Before that he was an Eagle Scout.

How long do you normally stay out on one of these missions.

GEORGE TOWSLEY: We can go for about three hours with the fuel we have. And we can stretch it to three point five missions. Four hours is about the very most this airplane can go. And that leaves us no reserve. So it's about three point five.

ROGERS: Will you be relieved by somebody else then?

TOWSLEY: No, I'm taking off now and I'll go to about five o'clock and then I start going back home.

ROGERS: Good luck.

TOWSLEY: Thank you very much.

ROGERS: Six weeks ago George Towsley's luck ran out. He was killed over Laos. No one knows how many Americans have died there. That part of the secret war is still secret.

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