

THE WASHINGTON POST Tuesday, Jan. 26, 1971

CIA-Backed Laotians Said Entering China

By Michael Morrow

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VIENTIANE, Laos — United States intelligence operations include the sending of armed Laotian reconnaissance teams into China from northern Laos, sources here say. Teams are reported to have gone as far as 200 miles into China, dispatched from a secret CIA outpost 15 minutes' flying time north of the Laotian opium center at Houei Sai.

According to sources close to the Central Intelligence Agency, and confirmed by Western diplomatic sources in Vientiane, the CIA is sending out hill tribesmen armed with American weapons, a three-pound radio with a range of 400 miles and equipment to tap Chinese telegraph lines, watch roads and do other types of intelligence gathering.

"There is always a team in China," sources close to the CIA said.

Staging area for the operation is a small mountain valley airstrip called Nam Lieu (also known as Nam Yu). The strip, which one Air American pilot describes as "difficult as hell to get into," is surrounded by mountains. It is serviced by both Air America and Continental Air Service, and is also a way-station for opium traders from northern Laos and Burma en route to drug factories at Houei Sai.

During 1968, five Chinese functionaries caught up in the purges of the Cultural Revolution defected to a Nam Lieu reconnaissance team. They were treated well by the Americans for a time but eventually were turned over to the Royal Laotian government.

According to sources close to the CIA, the five were thrown into a 12 by 12 by 12 foot pit exposed to the elements. They were eventually executed. Like most CIA operations in Laos, the one out of Nam Lieu is directed from a headquarters at Udorn air base in northeastern Thailand. There are several Americans at Nam Lieu, including CIA and military intelligence personnel. Sources close to the CIA report the number has increased recently from four to more than 10.

In addition to activities inside China, the Nam Lieu Americans also help direct a joint operation of "SGU" (special guerrilla units) and the Thai army at Xieng Lom south of Houei Sai on the Lao-Thai border. They also run intelligence-gathering missions on a road being built by the Chinese government (under an agreement reached with the now-defunct coalition government of Laos) in the same vicinity. Until mid-September of last year, the Nam Lieu operation was headed by a rough-and-tumble veteran guerrilla organizer named Anthony "Tony" Poe. Poe is a legendary figure in Laos known best for his dislike of journalists, disregard for orders and radio codes, capacity for Lao whiskey and expertise at clandestine guerrilla operations.

ever, this reason was an excuse used by the American embassy here to get rid of Poe, whose style has been a source of long-term friction with members of the American mission in Laos including Ambassador McMurtrie Godley.

The September story was reportedly a major concern of CIA Director Richard Helms when he visited Laos in the fall. Helms was quite upset that there might be a leak within the CIA in Laos, sources close to the CIA report.

Whether by design or coincidence, Vince Shields, in charge of CIA operations at Long Cheng on the edge of the Plain of Jars north of Vientiane, and Patrick Devlin, station chief for the CIA in Vientiane, have both been transferred.

As for the mission into China, sources close to the CIA and Western diplomatic sources both report that to their knowledge the missions are continuing.

Since leaving Nam Lieu, Poe has spent most of his time at Udorn air base, although one source reported that Poe continued to do "odd jobs" on the Thai-Cambodian border. Those who know him say he is unhappy away from Nam Lieu.

Poe is an ex-Marine noncommissioned officer, wounded at Iwo Jima, who remained in Asia after World War II. In the 1950s he helped organize CIA-trained Tibetan insurgents, escorting them to Colorado for training and going back with them into Tibet.

Later he worked in the Thai-Cambodian border area with the Khmer Serai, anti-Sihanouk guerrillas receiving assistance from the CIA, and other parts of Thailand. He has been in and out of Laos since before the Geneva Accords of 1962 and was one of the first Americans involved in arming and training paramilitary groups in Laos.

Poe is considered stubborn and brusque, sometimes going into fits of anger over the radio, his lifeline with the outside world. He is said to prefer working with hill tribes to working with Americans and looks down on most American operations because of their heavy reliance on American personnel.

He has been wounded at least once during his time in Laos, and reportedly has been put on his knees by the Pathet Lao. He is reportedly the only American legally married to a woman of the tribes.

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