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ON PAGE D7

THE WASHINGTON POST
7 September 1980

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The CIA's Class of '52

Not far from one of the country's busiest tourist attractions, colonial Williamsburg, Va., is one of the government's most secret installations—Camp Peary, the Central Intelligence Agency's training facility.

Known in the agency as "The Farm," Camp Peary is rich in memories of long-departed spooks who were trained there. But of all the strange classes that matriculated in its poison-ivied halls, none is remembered with greater awe than a 30-man group that was put through its paces there in 1952. The most famous—or infamous—member of the 1952 class was a man who could have inspired the character of Kurtz in "Apocalypse Now." Let's call him Luke.

Luke's physical stamina was noted as exceptional even during his training days at Camp Peary. Unfortunately, his resistance to fatigue was not matched by his resistance to the effects of alcohol. One evening at the camp bar, he overreacted spectacularly to a few beers. In full regalia—black commando uniform topped by a black World War I army hat, and a dagger in his belt—he dived headfirst out the (fortunately) first-floor window, shouting, "Geronimo! Geronimo! Geronimo!"

After leaving Camp Peary, Luke was assigned to northeastern Thailand. Surveying his isolated outposts on foot, he wore out the hardy tribesmen assigned as his guides. The Thai mountaineers had

to work out a system of relay teams to keep up with the indefatigable Luke.

From Thailand, Luke was assigned to lead the Meo tribesmen of Laos in their doomed, years-long struggle against the communist Pathet Lao.

Luke did more than just adopt protective coloration. He went native, and married a tribal chieftain's daughter. He won the hearts and minds of the natives by carrying a wounded tribesman on his back for miles through the wilderness, saving the man's life.

The Meo hill people regarded Luke as invincible. But a CIA station officer in Vientiane refused to believe the stories of Luke's exploits. What's more, he let Luke know that he thought his reports of Pathet Lao dead were exaggerated.

Furious, Luke stormed into the doubting desk man's office and dumped out a sackful of human ears to substantiate his latest kill claims.

The Meo tribes fought gallantly under the CIA's leadership, but the victorious Pathet Lao exacted bloody retribution. The tribes have been so decimated that only a few survivors can be found—in refugee camps in Thailand.

Like the tribesmen he led for 10 years, Luke was apparently crushed by defeat. "The last time I saw him," said Luke's one-time colleague Ralph McGehee, "he was lurking near the Bangkok Embassy cafeteria, avoiding everyone."

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