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'They Live Short but Happy Lives'

Meo Pilots: Flights Against the Odds

By ROBERT KAYLOR

LONG CHENG, Laos (UPI)—Lt. Vang Bee Cai-kuevang recently chalked up his 500th combat mission as a fighter-bomber pilot. As a veteran of the north Laos air war, this means that he has been flying all of eight months.

Vang Bee, who is 22 years old, is one of seven Meo hilltribe pilots who fly in the mini-air force of converted T28 trainers attached to the CIA-sponsored "Secret Army" of Maj. Gen. Vang Pao, which fights against the North Vietnamese in North Laos.

It used to be a rule in the U.S. Air Force that pilots earned themselves a ticket home after 100 combat missions in high-risk areas in Indochina, and it took most American pilots close to a year to pile up that many.

The Meos average eight to nine missions a day in their little propeller-driven planes when the weather permits, and it does not take long to pile up an impressive total of missions—if the pilot lives long enough.

There has been a total of somewhere between 20 and 30 Meo pilots trained in the last four or five years, according to one tally. That there are only seven now flying out of this headquarters base for the "Secret Army" gives an idea of the odds they face when they climb into the cockpit. "They tend to lead a short but happy life," says one American who knows them well.

The Meos have become the backbone of air support for Vang Pao's hilltribe guerrillas since the Communist offensive

in South Vietnam has kept most of the big U.S. jets with their impressive firepower busy with daily strikes "across the mountain" in North and South Vietnam.

T28's carry only four 250-pound bombs each, plus 50-caliber machine guns, which are not always effective against well dug-in targets but they can go much lower and slower than the jets, which gives them almost pinpoint bombing accuracy in the hands of a skilled pilot.

Going lower and slower also makes it a lot easier to get shot down. The T28's were withdrawn from combat at the onset of a North Vietnamese offensive on the Plain of Jars north of Long Cheng last December when sophisticated Communist anti-aircraft guns knocked three out of the sky in a few hours. "It was impossible to cope with," said an American official.

Like the "Secret Army," Vang Pao's air force is a U.S.-sponsored operation. Americans supervise maintenance of the T28's and the loading of bombs. When a T28 is lost, it is replaced from a stockpile kept at the air base at Udorn, across the Mekong River in Thailand.

Vang Bee affects a tailored royal blue flight suit just like the ones worn by some U.S. jet fighter pilots. He wears his blue overseas cap at a jaunty angle.

On his uniform Vang Bee proudly wears the patch of the 567th Special Operations Wings, the U.S. Air Force unit which taught him how to fly T28's in a course at Udorn. The patch proclaims "every man a tiger."

The ranks of Meo pilots at Long Cheng are fleshed out with Lao airmen from the lowlands

and, according to some sources, occasional reinforcements from Thailand's Air Force. Lowlanders are said to like flying at Long Cheng despite the risks since the CIA pays better than the Laotian Air Force.

For the Meos, the risks go beyond enemy fire. They do not know how to fly on instruments and if they get into bad weather face the threat of falling victim to vertigo and losing control. U.S. officials believe that is what happened to one T28 which failed to return from a mission in cloudy skies earlier this week.

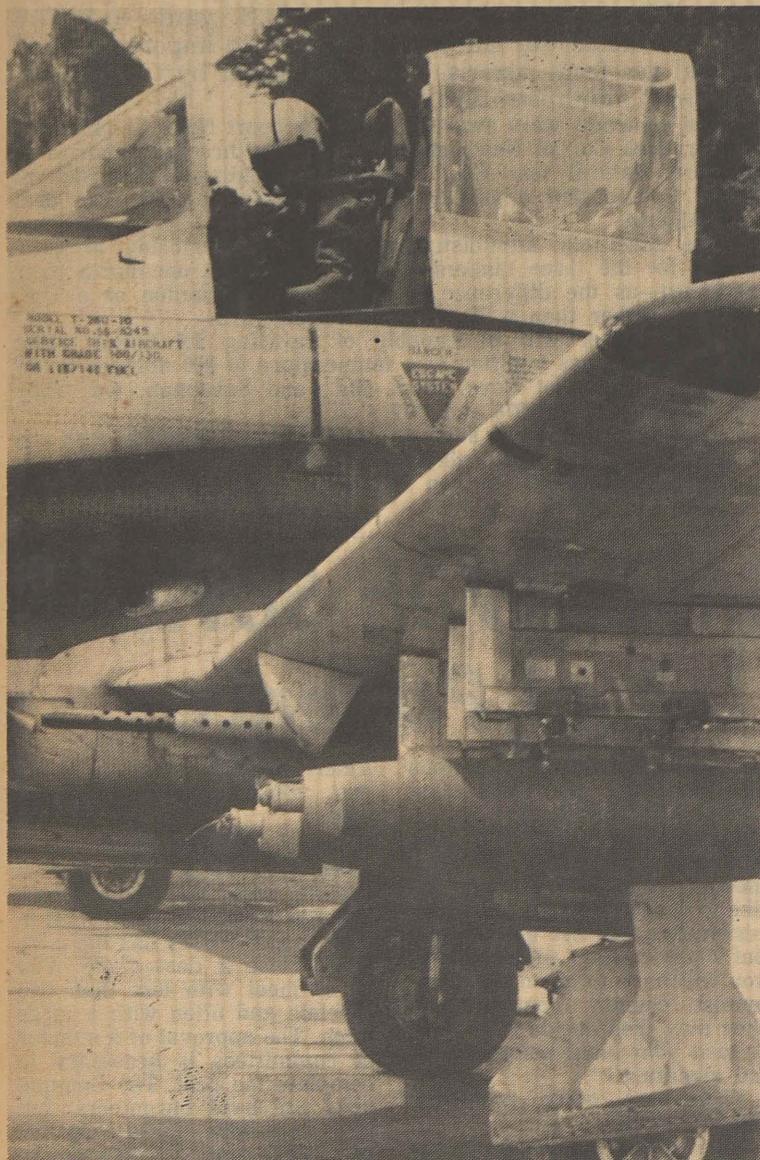
Vang Bee's immediate boss at Long Cheng is Capt. Vang Sue, one of the first Meo pilots to get his wings. At 27 years of age, Vang Sue has been flying for four years and beaten all the odds. He says he has about 3,150 combat missions.

There were six of the T28's sitting on the flight line at Long Cheng as Vang Sue showed some visitors around, but he said only four of them were flyable. The tribesmen pointed to the un-serviceable aircraft.

"Broken," he said. It developed that what he meant in the case of one plane was a bullet hole from a Communist machine gun which had gone through the wing, slicing through a control cable so that it remained stretched taut by a single strand.

The plane had been damaged on a mission flown earlier that day by Vang Sue's wingman, a grinning tribesman in a yellow polo shirt and baseball cap with a pistol slung on his hip, cowboy style.

"If that cable breaks, he crash" said Vang Sue. "I guess maybe he lucky."



One of the fighter planes of the mini-air force of converted T28 trainers attached to the CIA-sponsored "Secret Army" fighting against North Vietnamese in northern Laos. (UPI)

Cpl. My Noy, a Legless 'Statistic' of the War in Laos

The war in Vietnam has overshadowed the conflict in the tiny neighboring kingdom of Laos. But in the military hospital in Vientiane the cost is dramatically on show.

By PETER O'LOUGHLIN
VIENTIANE, Laos (AP) — It was 3 a.m. the 34th Infantry Battalion of the royal Lao army, understrength as usual, slept. Sentries on duty brushed aside mosquitos and peered nervously into the jungle near the Lao Mekong River town of Takhek.

It was the traditional time for an attack by North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao.

Inside the rough command post, Cpl. My Noy was asleep on the floor. He was awakened by the crump of mortars impacting in the compound.

"I grabbed my gun ready to fight," he recalls.

But he didn't get the chance. The next brace of 60mm and 82mm mortars hit squarely on the battalion command post. One Lao trooper was killed instantly and nine were seriously wounded. Cpl. My Noy got hideous shrapnel wounds in his right leg and left foot.

After eight years in the army, five of which were with the combat infantry outfit, he had become at 25 a statistic of the war in Laos.

The official report of the incident stated briefly that a Pathet Lao force had attacked a government outpost near Takhek but was beaten back. Government casualties were described as light.

Medical evacuation, like everything else in the Lao army, is primitive. My Noy was given first aid for his wounds and flown the next day by helicopter to the military hospital in Savannakhet 60 miles away.

There they amputated his right leg below the knee.

Later, after his condition improved enough for him to travel, he was flown to the modern, new, U.S.-built military hospital in Vientiane.

The stump of his amputated leg is healing. But a bad wound in his left foot won't heal and is causing him trouble. It might have to come off too.

The future looks bleak. He was earning 5,200 kip—about \$8.50 a month—after eight years and three previous wounds.

His father came to visit him in Vientiane but has gone back south to the village. It's rice planting time and every able-bodied adult and child is needed in the paddies.

So My Noy lies in his hospital bed, watching TV picked up from a Thai station across the Mekong River. Laos doesn't have television.

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promises doctors have made that he will walk again with an artificial limb.

"I don't know what I will do," he said, fighting back tears as he lay in the ward with two dozen other amputees, burn cases and other badly wounded soldiers.

My Noy and the other men in the ward are soldiers of what has been called the forgotten war in Laos.

Few armies and fewer nations could take so many casualties for so few measurable victories as the Lao have done in 10 years.

From January to May this year, government casualties totaled 1,019 killed, 2,901 wounded and 289 missing, according to official figures.

There were few big battles. Most of the casualties came in small-scale probes or mortar attacks like the one in which My Noy was wounded.

Almost 5 per cent of the Lao

regular army and its irregular militia forces have been killed or wounded so far this year.

From 1968 through 1971 when the North Vietnamese turned the screws on the Lao around the Plain of Jars and in the south, the Lao army lost an average 10 men killed every day, according to some estimates.

These are staggering figures for a country in which there are only about one million people under government control, of whom 260,000 are refugees depending totally on the United States for food and support. Manpower is so short the army is picking up youths off the street and outside movie houses and sending them to the front with only the most basic training.

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lier accent, was trained in France and does seven or eight operations a day.

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Many Westerners in Vientiane wonder how long the Lao army can continue to take such casualties, particularly as it is now fighting to hold shrinking areas around the main towns on the Mekong River.

"By the time the North Vietnamese have finished there won't be any Lao left," said a Western diplomat.

Days Were Golden In Laos—Before

BANGKOK (AP)—Laos' once flourishing gold smuggling industry, which brought in 30 per cent of the country's revenues, has collapsed, forcing the government to take drastic action to save what remains of the economy.

The result has been devaluation, a booming currency black-market and gloomy forecasts from the Chinese and Vietnamese traders who have skimmed what little cream there was to be had from the Laotian economy.

Stores in Samsen Thai, Vientiane's main street, which stock luxuries as diverse as canned French wine, snails, television sets for a country that has no stations and the widest assortment of the cheapest liquor in Asia, are finding it difficult and expensive to get foreign exchange to pay for imports.

In the market, prices of all foodstuffs, mostly imported from Thailand, a mile away across the Mekong River, have risen dramatically.

Gold shops will not accept kip, the local currency. Nor will the kip buy a rail ticket to Bangkok from that state railway office. They only want baht or dollars which they exchange at a rate 30 per cent higher than the official rate of 605 to the dollar.

Part of the current economic problems, which have resulted in Finance Minister Sisouk Champassak being censured by the National Assembly, stem from the decline of the gold business.

For years the Lao government has allowed free import of gold for which they charged 5.5 per cent duty. This brought in about \$2.3 million a year to the treasury, slightly more than the country achieved in foreign trade in most years.

The Lao government paid no heed to what importers did with the gold once they got it into the country. This meant it was smuggled back across to Thailand or South Vietnam.

However the money-minded government of Singapore saw the value of the gold trade, lowered its import duties and effectively snatched the transit gold trade away from Laos.

To make up the lost revenue, the Lao government devalued the kip by 20 per cent last November, doubled import duties and made foreign exchange hard to get in an effort to stop capital flight.

This was done largely at the urging of the group of nations that have clubbed together each year since 1964 to keep Laos from going bankrupt. The United States, France, Australia, Britain and Japan have con-

tributed an increasing amount of foreign exchange annually through what is called the Foreign Exchange Operations Fund (FEOF).

However there was no control over who bought the foreign exchange from the banks, and much of it went to Chinese and Vietnamese traders to finance the import of luxury goods at low duty rates or to businessmen who wanted to repatriate profits in hard currency.

U.S. congressional critics of America's large contribution to FEOF also pointed out that controls were so lax that even the Communist Pathet Lao or North Vietnamese who both maintain missions in Vientiane could get dollars from the fund if they wanted to.

Controls have now been established and the Lao government has contributed to the fund for the first time.

The Lao government also imposed restrictions on the amount of foreign currency an individual could take abroad. They limited it to \$200 a month per person for Thailand up to \$600 a month per person for the United States.

This led to such a rush for passports that the Foreign Ministry quickly ran out. Government officials and businessmen had found the loophole.

All that was required to gain the \$200 allowance was a passport and visa for Thailand. They made a quick 15-minute trip to Thai immigration checkpoint across the river at Nong Khai, got their passports stamped, returned to Vientiane and sold their \$200 in the black market at a profit of 25 per cent or more.

The government tried to stop it by issuing letters of credit collectible at the destination. But the smart operators soon began sending couriers loaded with passports to Singapore to collect the foreign exchange.

As of now the government is still fishing for a solution.

The U.S. government, which spends large sums in military support for the hard pressed Lao government, has strongly urged the Lao to start growing their own foodstuffs instead of spending hard currency they don't have to buy it from Thailand.

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Reds Stronger Than Ever

Is It the Beginning of the End for Laos?

By LEON DANIEL

VIENTIANE, Laos (UPI) — Communist forces in Laos now hold their strongest position ever.

If the Indochina war ended today, North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao forces in Laos could claim a military victory, something the Communists have been unable to achieve in neighboring South Vietnam.

In an exclusive interview, Acting Defense Minister Sisouk Na Champasack said the fall of Long Cheng, the super-secret base operated in north-central Laos by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), could open the way for Communist infiltration into Vientiane.

"I don't know if we can hold it," Sisouk said.

He also said that Pakse, the main commercial town in southern Laos, is gravely threatened.

Sisouk said that the north-south Highway 13, the main road link between Vientiane and the royal capital of Luang Prabang, is still severed as a result of Pathet Lao harassment west of the Plain of Jars, which fell under the complete control of three rampaging North Vietnamese divisions in mid-December.

Some of the Americans here who run the war in Laos privately acknowledge that they expect the military situation to worsen before President Nixon visits Peking next month.

And that, according to Sisouk, is precisely what the Communists planned when they opened their dry season offensive a month and a half ago.

The North Vietnamese expect their recent sweeping gains to place Hanoi in a strong position before any discussions in Peking on a solution to the Indochina war.

The capture of Long Cheng, 12 miles southwest of the plain, would be a serious — and perhaps ultimately fatal — blow to the Allied effort in Laos.

"If Long Cheng is captured, the way will be open for the Communists to infiltrate all the way to Vientiane," said Sisouk, who serves as defense minister, although Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma holds the defense portfolio.

Sisouk said the main threat to Long Cheng comes from some 20 130 mm artillery pieces, introduced by the Communists in Laos for the first time during their successful campaign to capture the plain.

"It is a terrible gun," said Sisouk. "We are not afraid of their infantry but we have got to kill those guns."

Spotter planes have difficulty pinpointing the big weapons, which move behind tracked vehicles, because the North Vietnamese use pyrotechnic devices as decoys which look dismayingly like muzzle flashes to pilots in the air.

accuracy as an antitank weapon.

American military sources agree that Sisouk is correct in his assessment of the Communist threat to Long Cheng.

The Americans already have removed to the south some secret cryptographic equipment from Long Cheng. The two dozen or so Americans who work at the base no longer spend their nights there, but fly in after dawn from Vientiane and fly out before sunset.

The Thai soldiers at Long Cheng are there under mysterious and unexplained circumstances. Some Americans contend there are as many as 5,000 of them in the Long Cheng area.

The Thai government insists it has no "regular soldiers" in Laos, but has acknowledged

unofficially that there may be some Thai "volunteers" in this country.

In any case, American sources here contend that the Thai soldiers at Long Cheng and elsewhere in Laos are paid for by the United States.

Heavy losses among the Thai forces in Laos could have serious political repercussions in Thailand, where the citizens have never been told by their government the extent of the Thai involvement in Laos.

Gen. Vang Pao, the Meo commander of the Laos forces in and around Long Cheng, has split and dispersed his command group since the bombardment of the base began.

Vang Pao, evacuated Tuesday from Long Cheng, was treated for pneumonia at an American

hospital at Udorn AB in northeast Thailand. He is recovering in Vientiane now and is expected to return soon to Long Cheng.

But his troops are known to be exhausted—and perhaps demoralized—by the series of defeats which led to the Communists regaining control of the Plain of Jars.

Those Meo troops, considered the best the government has, were routed on the plain. They left at least 20 artillery pieces there when they fled southward. Those guns are now in the hands of the North Vietnamese.

Sisouk acknowledged the government lost "more than a thousand" soldiers—including dead, missing and wounded—in the battles on the plain, but he added that casualty reports were still incomplete.

In any case, the Meos on the plain were defeated soundly.

"They are demoralized," said a government source, pointing out that the Meos and other irregular Laotian forces have done most of the government's fighting throughout the war.

In recent years, the irregulars have provided the cutting edge of the Laotian military, leaving static defense to regular Army troops.

There is now no doubt that the recent defeats on the plain blunted that edge.

The Meos are known to fight best when they are defending their families and their homeland, but the families of the soldiers fled southward from Long Cheng with other civilians when the heavy bombardment started.

There is some evidence that both the Americans and the government have become reconciled to the possibility that Long Cheng cannot be held much longer. It is known that there are contingency plans to abandon it if necessary.

The serious deterioration of the Allied military position in Laos began a month and a half ago when Moung Soui, a key position on the western edge of the plain, fell to the North Vietnamese.

This was followed by a series of separate actions on the plain, which was completely abandoned to the Communists on Dec. 20.

There also was trouble in southern Laos on and around the Bolovens Plateau as 1971 drew to a close. On Dec. 6, Laotian troops were ordered, after heavy fighting, to withdraw from Saravane, a town 24 miles north of the plateau.

The Americans said at the time that Saravane, although it straddles Route 23, a key artery in the south, "has no significant military value."

Shortly thereafter, on Dec. 28, government forces lost Paksong, a town on the Bolovens recaptured from the Communists after heavy government losses just last September.

The Americans said Paksong was not worth much either but when the Laotians recaptured it the feat was billed as a "significant political and military victory."

But by mid-December it was clear that real trouble was shaping up on the Plain of Jars, where three divisions of North Vietnamese were using some 20 tanks, heavy artillery and mortars, followed by massive ground assaults.

After Laotian forces were pushed off the plain, government military authorities described the intensity of the North Vietnamese fire as "the heaviest ever encountered in Laos."

On Dec. 23, three days after the plain was lost, a North Vietnamese unit staged a pre-dawn rocket and mortar attack on the airstrip at Long Cheng.

Thousands of civilians, including families of the Meo soldiers, began fleeing to the south because they feared more shellings from the North Vietnamese forces building up around the base.

As the year ended, the situation in north-central Laos was extremely tense, with North Vietnamese forces moving with relative impunity south and southwest of the plain and around Long Cheng itself.



Laotian troops, dug in on Skyline Ridge overlooking Long Cheng, keep a sharp lookout for Communist troops. Rising behind

them is smoke from fires started by Communist shelling. The Laotians said Tuesday they controlled the entire ridge. (AP)

Leaving Town to Reds

Laotians to Pull Out of Hot Spot

VIENTIANE, Laos (UPI) — Government troops are preparing to evacuate Muong Kasi, about 80 miles north of here on Highway 13, in the face of a determined Communist thrust from the north, Defense Ministry sources said Tuesday.

They said two artillery pieces were withdrawn from the depopulated town to a new fire-base further south. They said government troops plan to form a defense line about three miles south of Muong Kasi, leaving bunker positions in the town

manned to slow down any attack.

Muong Kasi has been threatened since last Friday, when North Vietnamese and pro-Pathet Lao troops took the important road junction of Sala Phou Khoun 18 miles to the north. They thus cut all road travel on Highway 13 between Vientiane and the royal capital of Luang Prabang, 40 miles north of the junction.

The Communists have been moving tanks, men and materiel into the Sala Phou Khoun area along Highway 7 from the Plain

of Jars to the east, despite bombing by Laotian planes.

Sunday night, Communist troops overran government high ground positions overlooking Highway 13 north of Muong Kasi, and since then have been shelling and harassing it and other government positions in the area. Laotian Air Force AC47 gunships bombed the Communist positions Monday night and Tuesday.

U.S. sources said government reinforcements have been sent to the Muong Kasi area.

Meanwhile, government mili-

tary sources said Laotian forces now fully control Skyline Ridge, which overlooks and is considered vital to the defense of Long Cheng.

The sources said government forces Monday reoccupied two positions called Charlie Tango and Charlie Delta, which serve as helicopter landing zones on the eastern end of the ridge.

The Laotian soldiers walked into the positions without resistance after enemy fire subsided, the sources said.

"At the moment, Long Cheng is clearly out of danger but the enemy is still in the area," an American source said.

But both Laotian and American sources said a few enemy mortar rounds continue to fall on Skyline Ridge, which is adjacent to Long Cheng, the north-central Laotian base where the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency trained, advised, supported and paid Meo irregulars.

The Americans moved most of their operations from the base when it came under intensive Communist pressure after the North Vietnamese overran the nearby Plain of Jars in mid-December.

Monday night there were small clashes and mortar attacks at Sam Thong, seven miles northwest of Long Cheng, but there was no significant damage, Laotian sources said. Some of the rounds hit Fire Base Thunder, two miles southeast of Sam Thong.

4 Planes Believed Hit By Red Chinese in Laos

VIENTIANE, Laos (AP) — Red Chinese anti-aircraft guns are believed to have hit four U.S. planes searching for three Americans missing in northwestern Laos, an Air America spokesman said Wednesday.

In the most recent incident last Saturday, James Rhyne, chief pilot of Air America in Laos, was wounded seriously by an 85mm shell that struck his small Volpar plane.

Rhyne was dropping leaflets offering rewards to Laotian villagers for return of the three Americans, missing since their C123 transport plane vanished Dec. 27.

The Chinese are building a road in territory in the northwest held by the pro-Communist Pathet Lao, and heavily defend it with anti-aircraft guns.

The spokesman said none of the four planes hit was shot down, adding: "We are almost sure Chinese anti-aircraft fire is responsible."

Because of the threat, an air corridor seven miles wide on each side of the road was declared off limits to U.S. pilots.

Rhyne's plane was hit 12 miles from the road, and the corridor therefore has been widened to 24 miles, the spokesman reported.

The Fight for Long Cheng

Awful Price of a Prize No One Can Afford

LONG CHENG, Laos (UPI)—Despite all the blood Laotian and North Vietnamese forces have spilled at this once-secret base, neither side may be willing to pay the additional cost of occupancy.

And despite the huge sums of money the United States has poured into Long Cheng, it is doubtful if the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) will

ever again be able to operate here in quite the same way it has for the past decade.

Although heavy fighting continues in and around the base, U.S. officials already are downgrading its military importance.

"You guys are trying to make this another Dien Bien Phu," a U.S. official grumbled recently to journalists.

Whether or not Laotian forces,

with American help, can hold Long Cheng, the CIA role here already has changed.

The CIA agents here had become used to operating unfettered by the scrutiny of the press, but on Wednesday newsmen were admitted and given free access to the base for the first time in its 10-year history.

But by the time the newsmen

arrived, the role of the CIA at Long Cheng had changed.

Sophisticated equipment, including cryptographic machines, already had been removed to the rear because of intense enemy pressure on Long Cheng.

Buildings used by the Americans here were among those most heavily damaged by shelling from the big 130 mm enemy artillery pieces, introduced into

Laos for the first time when North Vietnamese forces overran the nearby Plain of Jars in mid-December.

Prince Sisouk Na Champasack, defense minister said at Long Cheng Wednesday that the main objective of the North Vietnamese forces here is to destroy the government troops of Gen. Vang Pao, the commander of Military Region Two and considered the most effective fighting general the government has.

The North Vietnamese are fighting at Long Cheng because this is where they can engage Vang Pao's forces, who also are the best the government has.

U.S. officials acknowledge the North Vietnamese could overrun Long Cheng if they wanted to pay the price, but it is doubtful that the Communists would find it to their advantage to occupy it permanently. The base and the town lie in a valley that would be an inviting target for American air strikes.

The North Vietnamese already have achieved some of their objectives at Long Cheng.

An estimated 30,000 persons, families of the government soldiers and others, have been forced to flee southward.

Americans no longer spend the night at Long Cheng, but fly in by helicopter after dawn and out before sunset because of the heavy enemy shelling.

The government forces and the Americans are not using the Long Cheng air strip now because it is within easy range of North Vietnamese 82mm mortars dug in on high ground.

Until early this week the government forces had all they could do to maintain a foothold at Long Cheng.

The North Vietnamese have served notice that the base probably cannot again be used with impunity by the CIA to train, advise, pay and support the Meo irregulars.

Sisouk believes it is in his country's interest to hold fast at Long Cheng.

He said that the fall of Long Cheng would pave the way for North Vietnamese infiltration into Vientiane, 80 miles to the south.

The Americans, however, do not plan to help the Laotians hold Long Cheng at any cost.

Vang Pao may be able to hold Long Cheng, but there is little doubt that the usefulness of the base—and the American role there—has been sharply reduced by the increasing force of Communist arms.

LAOS DETAINS SOVIET PLANE

VIENTIANE — A Russian Laotian for Hanoi, reliable Laotian sources said yesterday. American bombing over North Vietnam was reported to have caused the four engine Aeroflot cargo plane to put down at the airport.

National Airlines cargo plane was detained in Vientiane several days last week after it landed at the Laotian capital's international airport and was found to be loaded with arms



Laotian troops cover their ears with their hands as they fire a mortar at Communist positions outside the beleaguered headquarters base of Gen. Van Pao at Long Cheng. (AP)

Communist Shells Pound Long Cheng; Situation 'Grim'

VIENTIANE, Laos (UPI) — The military base of Long Cheng, 105 miles north of here, has been under heavy sustained Communist artillery fire since Friday, military sources said Sunday. They said a ground assault was expected.

A military officer who returned Sunday from Long Cheng said at least 500 rounds of 130mm artillery fire have hit the town since Friday. A Meo radio station was knocked out, a gasoline depot blown up, several barracks hit, and a T28 fighter-bomber parked on the airfield was damaged.

He said more than 30,000 civilians have been evacuated from the town.

Long Cheng is a major Meo guerrilla base south of the Plain of Jars, which was retaken by the Communists two weeks ago.

Military sources said that though there were no reports of a major ground attack yet, it appeared that the artillery was intended to soften up the defenses and a ground assault was "imminent."

Government troops were reported to be in well-fortified hill positions round the town and airfield — the latter already put

out of action by Communist gunners — and the defenders were dependent on air drops and helicopters for supplies. The returned officer said the situation was "grim."

The shelling of Long Cheng coincided with Sunday's election for 60 members of the National Assembly. The government claims the recent Communist offensive, during which both the Plain of Jars and the Bolovens Plateau in the south were taken, was partly intended to harass and hamper the elections.

National Election Committee officials said Sunday the Communist Pathet Lao tried to disrupt the elections by shelling and looting polling booths. The Pathet Lao called for a boycott of the elections, on the grounds they are illegal under the terms of the Geneva Treaty.

Results of the election are due to be declared Tuesday. Most candidates are backers of the government of Prime Minister Prince Souvanna Phouma, and no change in government policy is expected.

Pilot Rescued in Laos Set Speed Record—on Foot

VIENTIANE, Laos (AP) — An Air America pilot whose plane was destroyed on the ground by enemy mortar fire Thursday outraced his North Vietnamese pursuers for two miles in the jungles of northern Laos before being plucked to safety by a helicopter.

Suffering only a scratched arm, James Wallace Russell, 49, Odessa, Tex., described his ordeal a few hours after the rescue. His wife and three children slept in an upstairs bedroom of his Vientiane apartment as he spoke.

Lanky, mustachioed Russell affects the laconic manner and suede boots of the soldier-of-fortune types who earn a hazardous living flying for Air America, a private charter firm often called the "CIA Airline," in Laos.

He's been with Air America for seven years. By his own account, he had a World War II career in which he piloted B24 Liberators, won the Silver Star and two Distinguished Flying Crosses, was wounded once and sank a Japanese ship off the Borneo coast.

"But I never had to run around on the ground trying to save my life," he said.

6 Pacific Stars & Stripes
Saturday, Jan. 22, 1972

Russell's ordeal began when he was assigned to fly a customer known as Swamp Rat and five associates to a location called Site 113.

The plane he flies is a Porter, a Swiss-built aircraft with a powerful engine designed for extremely short take offs from mountain airstrips.

The pilots of the fragile-looking, seven-seat Porters do some of the most dangerous flying of all in Laos and Vietnam, and earn up to \$45,000 a year.

"It was a classified operation and I didn't know any of the passengers," Russell related. "All I can say is that I was the only American in the plane."

He said that after some passengers were let off and others got aboard at an airstrip about 125 miles north of Vientiane, he was ordered to look for a landing site near Ban Tha Si, about 100 miles northeast of the capital.

"Swamp Rat told me they were looking for a place to load refugees," he said. "I should have known right then that it was going to be bad."

Swamp Rat checked with a ground controller by radio and was told it was safe to go in. Russell landed, taxied to one end of the tiny strip and shut down the turboprop engine.

"There I'm sitting, filling out the log and the prop is unwinding—and I knew it was a strap," he said.

"As soon as the prop stopped, the first round hit. It blew holes in the airplane. They were waiting for us."

Russell said that as he jumped out, another round landed between him and Swamp Rat. The concussion knocked them both down and caused Russell to cut his arm.

"They put a hundred rounds down there before you could blink," he continued.

He considered getting into a hole and waiting for a rescue helicopter, but "then I saw these guys coming down off the mountain. They were swarming around like ants."

"I said, 'Who's that, Swamp Rat?' and he said, 'The enemy.'"

"We started running and they started shooting. We ran around in the bamboo and jungle for 1½ hours. Two indigenous types hung back with their M16s and tried to hold them off, but they were real close. I could hear them thrashing around in the bush out there, looking for me."

Finally, an Air America rescue helicopter reached the scene and hoisted Russell out of a small jungle clearing. A second helicopter rescued Swamp Rat and his five mysterious companions.

"I've never been so glad in my life," Russell said.

Electronic Gear Moved Out

CIA Girds for Attack on Laos Guerrilla Base

VIENTIANE, Laos (AP) — The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) has evacuated its sophisticated electronic equipment from the guerrilla base of Long Cheng in northern Laos as North Vietnamese forces poise for a major attack, informed sources said Friday.

The equipment — mostly communications gear — was moved to positions closer to Vientiane, the sources said.

Americans based at Long Cheng have been ordered to spend the nights in Vientiane

and commute daily to the guerrilla base, the sources added.

Long Cheng, 78 miles northeast of Vientiane, has been threatened with attack since the North Vietnamese overran the nearby Plain of Jars 10 days ago.

General Vang Pao, Meo tribal commander of Laos' second military region, has established a new defense line about halfway across the 20-mile distance between Long Cheng and the Plain of Jars, military sources said.

Advance North Vietnamese

elements either penetrated or skirted the line Wednesday when they captured Muong Phoun, 13 miles southwest of Long Cheng, the sources said.

The North Vietnamese have committed 15,000 to 20,000 troops to their dry season offensive in northern Laos, military sources said. But because of the rugged terrain and lack of civilian population southwest of the Plain of Jars, many troops advancing toward Long Cheng are tied up hauling supplies, the sources added.

Nevertheless, the Communists outnumber Long Cheng's defenders by about two to one.

Laotian military men returning to Vientiane from the northern Laos fighting said Friday the morale of Thai troops has been seriously affected by the heavy losses they suffered on the Plain of Jars.

Of 500 Thai defenders at Phou Keng on the northwestern edge of the plain, only 18 managed to escape when their fire base came under attack Dec. 18, these sources said. Others —

dead and wounded — were left behind.

The 206th battalion, operating in mountains near Phou Keng, fared only slightly better, the sources said. Of 270 troops, 60 fled to Long Cheng. The others were either killed or captured, the sources said.

The sources claimed morale has been further eroded by delays in receiving pay. Many of the Thai and Laotian troops in northern Laos have not been paid for three months, the sources declared.

Allies Regain High Ground

See Turn in Long Cheng Battle

By LEON DANIEL

LONG CHENG, Laos (UPI)—Acting Defense Minister Prince Sisouk Na Champasack flew to Long Cheng Wednesday and expressed optimism over the improved government stand at the embattled base.

"The situation is much better now," said Sisouk who said two weeks ago that he did not know if government troops being besieged by North Vietnamese could hold on to the base 150 miles north of Vientiane.

Government troops had dislodged the Reds from much of the five-mile ridge overlooking the base, headquarters of Meo tribesmen irregulars trained, advised and paid by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

Maj. Chanh, who led four battalions in an assault on the North Vietnamese guerrillas on the ridge Sunday, told newsmen admitted to the battle scene for the first time in 10 years, that there had been hand-to-hand fighting.

Government forward forces Wednesday were in an eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation with North Vietnamese who had threatened and attacked the base since capturing the strategic Plain of Jars.

Sisouk said, "we are still meeting heavy resistance on the skyline (ridge)".

However Gen. Vang Pao, Meo commander, expressed optimism the base and the town of Long Cheng would be completely secured within a few days.

American planes were attacking Reds crowded out on about one-fourth of the five-mile ridge. Rifle fire crackled as soldiers moved through heavily damaged buildings in the town of Long Cheng. Government units were carrying out mopping up operations in the town against North Vietnamese infiltrators.

Maj. Chanh was hit by a pea-sized shrapnel as he told newsmen near his command bunker that his forces had suffered "very many" casualties since Sunday. His wound was bandaged. He later told newsmen his base had suffered 28 killed and 69 wounded at "Charlie Whisky," a high ground from where he directed the assault.

Vang Pao said the Reds had lost about 8,000 men in and around Long Cheng. But in the past three weeks government troops had suffered heavy losses when the Communist poured more than 6,000 rounds of 130mm artillery, he added.

However, Vang Pao said his forces had destroyed many of the 130mm guns the Communists introduced when they overran the Plain of Jars.

It was the first time in 10 years U.S. military authorities allowed newsmen into Long Cheng. Fourteen newsmen were given free access to the battered base and to charter an Air American plane to Ban Son, a base southwest of Long Cheng, from where they flew by chopper wherever they wanted to go.

The newsmen chose to go to Vang Paos's command post, the town of Long Cheng, the base and forward positions on the skyline ridge.

American officials said the decision to open Long Cheng to newsmen was made by Ambassador G. McMurtrie Godley, but some newsmen believed the decision might have been made in Washington.

Part of the Long Cheng base used by the CIA appeared to be the heaviest damaged, with some buildings leveled. The airstrip still could not be used, and officials would not risk losing million-dollar planes in using it.

Vang Pao also disclosed that three Thai battalions were fighting alongside his Meo forces. The Thai government has never admitted having troops fighting in Laos.

The Meo commander, refused to disclose the strength of his forces but estimated

Laos Units Gain In Heavy Fighting

VIENTIANE, Laos (UPI) — Government troops have made further advances against North Vietnamese troops in heavy fighting along Skyline Ridge two kilometers north of Long Cheng, military sources said Sunday.

They said the Communists sustained heavy casualties from U.S. and Laotian bombing, and that North Vietnamese shelling of the base 150 miles north of here had slackened off.

About three battalions of Laotian troops and Thai volunteers pushed out of Long Cheng two days ago and pushed the North Vietnamese off the center of the ridge.

The military sources said Sunday the government troops were pushing their way east along the

ridge, with the North Vietnamese withdrawing slowly in heavy fighting.

The sources said the North Vietnamese had lost the initiative in the area because of heavy casualties from the air attacks, and they said prospects for Long Cheng to remain in government hands were improving.

They said North Vietnamese mortars, which had been shelling Long Cheng for three weeks, fell silent Saturday. There still was some artillery fire, but less than in recent days.

Long Cheng, major U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) base in north-central Laos and headquarters of the CIA-financed Meo guerrillas, has been virtually surrounded in the past few weeks following North Vietnamese capture of the Plain of Jars to the north.

The military sources said the Communists could have taken Long Cheng if they had mounted an all-out assault four or five days ago. The few days made all the difference, they said, giving the government time to airlift four battalions of Lao troops and Thai volunteers into the military complex.

The sources said government mobile units conducted a "search and kill" operation inside the complex Saturday, and killed 12 North Vietnamese commandos near the airfield runway. They said government troops still are hunting down an estimated 150 North Vietnamese who infiltrated into Long Cheng Valley. Some have been killed, but no casualty figures have been given for the fighting around Long Cheng.

The Long Cheng airfield still is reported unfit for fixed-wing aircraft, and reinforcements and supplies are going in by helicopter and air drops.

A call from Vang Pao



GENERAL Vang Pao, commander of Laotian forces at the Long Cheng secret base in Laos, calls in air strikes on suspected communist positions from his Long Cheng command post. — UPI radiophoto

Grenades Jolt N. Viet Embassy in Laos

VIENTIANE, Laos (UPI) — Two grenade explosions rocked the North Vietnamese Embassy compound Sunday evening, injuring no one but damaging the embassy windows, police reported.

The metropolitan police deputy commander said the explosion was heard about 7:30 p.m., at a time when Prime Minister Prince Souvanna Phouma was attending a reception at the South Vietnamese Embassy. The reception was in honor of the Saigon Education Minister, Ngo Khac Tinh, who

came here for the Southeast Asia Educational Ministers Council, scheduled to open Monday.

After the explosion, Russian and Chinese Communist Embassy officials rushed to the North Vietnamese Embassy to make inquiries, but left 20 minutes later.

Police and military security officials said two Communist-made grenades, presumably of North Vietnamese origin, exploded about 30 feet from the embassy building and shrapnel

hit the embassy facade. The grenades apparently were thrown from inside the embassy compound.

Political observers here said the North Vietnamese might be trying to divert attention from their recent successful military drive in Laos.

Nguyen Vanh Thanh, the first secretary of the North Vietnamese Embassy, said he would lodge a strong protest with the Laos government. He also maintained that the police story that the explosives were tossed from

inside the compound was "absurd." The grenades were thrown from outside, he said. He said he had asked for police protection.

This is the third time since 1968 the North Vietnamese Embassy has been attacked with grenades.

The Laos government closed its embassy in Hanoi two years ago but did not break off diplomatic relations with the North Vietnamese government. The North Vietnamese maintain a 20-member staff in their embassy here.

Long Cheng Called Key to Vientiane

VIENTIANE (UPI) — Acting Defense Minister Sisouk Na Champassak said Thursday the fall of Long Cheng would pave the way for Communist infiltration into this administrative capital.

"I don't know if we can hold it," Sisouk said in an interview.

Long Cheng is a super-secret base operated by the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) just southwest of the Plain of Jars. The plain was overrun in mid-December and is now under almost complete control of North Vietnamese forces. It is defended by the Meo forces of Gen. Vang Pao, supported by regular Laotian Army troops and Thai soldiers.

Sisouk said 80 rounds of 130mm artillery fire crashed into Long Cheng shortly before he visited the base Wednesday. He said the new artillery introduced by the North Vietnamese during the campaign for the plain could cause the loss of Long Cheng.

Sisouk said the 130mm guns have a range of 16 miles and government forces are having extreme difficulty in coping with them.

The capture of Long Cheng would be a psychological victory for the North Vietnamese, Sisouk said.

"They want to destroy Gen. Vang Pao. He is one of our best

leaders. If Long Cheng is captured, the way will be open for the Communists to infiltrate all the way to Vientiane," he said.

Sisouk acknowledged that the government has contingency plans to abandon Long Cheng if it is necessary, but he said "we have to hold it."

He estimated that 32,000 North Vietnamese troops comprising three full divisions were operating in the Long Cheng area.

He said the big guns are moving on tracked vehicles around the southern edge of the plain, 12 miles from Long Cheng and within easy range of the base.

GEN OUANE ELECTED

General Ouane Rathikone, retired Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces of Laos, has been elected to the Laotian National Assembly, according to an authoritative report from Laos.

A news agency report previously published that Gen Ouane had lost in the election was inaccurate.

Laos AID Chief Admits CIA Cover

WASHINGTON (UPI) — Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) agents still operate in Laos under the guise of American foreign aid officials, according to the head of the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID) in Laos.

But he said no AID funds are going for military purposes.

Charles A. Mann, AID mission director in Laos since 1968, left for Vientiane Saturday after spending a week here in consultations. He said that AID supports the CIA in Laos "in a cost-sharing arrangement."

Mann noted that AID Administrator John A. Hannah testified to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee two years ago that since 1962, AID had

subsidized CIA activities in Laos and provided a cover for CIA agents there.

After Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, D-Mass., chairman of the Senate's Refugees subcommittee, protested that AID funds were being misspent, Hannah informed him in a May, 1971, letter that "at the beginning of fiscal year 1972, all of the AID financing with which you have been concerned will be terminated."

When Mann was asked by reporters if CIA agents were still operating by using AID as a cover, he replied "Yes." He said "the very definition of 'cover position' means that these persons would then identify themselves as AID personnel."

Laos Set for Election

VIENTIANE, Laos (UPI)—Government officials said they expect more than 60 per cent of the 864,174 registered voters out of a total population of 3 million will go to polls Sunday to elect representatives for the 60-seat National Assembly.

The Communist Pathet Lao is boycotting the election, claiming it to be "illegal" and contrary to the spirit of the 1962 Geneva agreement which guarantees Laotian independence and neutrality.

Officials said the recent communist offensive that drove the government troops off the Plain of Jars and the Bolovens Plateau was aimed at obstructing the elections. The government has repeatedly announced that elections would be held, as required by the constitution, regardless of Communist attacks.

Government sources said most of the candidates support the present government's policy. If the pro-government candidates obtain a majority, as expected, Prime Minister Prince Souvanna Phouma probably will reshuffle his cabinet.

Souvanna promised that the election would be free and honest. An order was issued by the interior ministry to prohibit selling of liquor and beer during election time.

SOUVANNA WARNS OF LAOS PERIL

VIENTIANE, Saturday — As North Vietnamese forces cut road links from Vientiane to the royal capital of Luang Prabang today, Laotian Prime Minister Prince Souvanna Phouma told a press conference that the Communists' dry season offensive this year was serious enough to be a threat to his Government and the existence of Laos.

Key road junction overrun

VIENTIANE, Sat — Communist troops last night overran the key road junction of Sala Phoukhoun, 100 miles (160 km) north of here, cutting road communications between Vientiane and the royal capital of Luang Prabang, military sources said today.

The military sources said North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao troops overran the junction after heavy fighting.

They said two government artillery bases near the cross roads were destroyed by North Vietnamese artillery, and the Communists were in full control of about 30 square miles around Sala Phoukhoun.

The North Vietnamese last overran the junction in 1969.

Heavy fighting was reported on Skyline Ridge, just north of Long Cheng base. Laotian troops hold the western and central sections of the ridge, but have been unable to oust the North Vietnamese from the eastern edge.

Military sources said the government troops had taken another hill position and were assaulting another. — UPI

But he warned the North Vietnamese not to press as far as the Mekong River, because this would bring a violent reaction from SEATO.

"I think they would react violently as they did in 1961," the Premier said.

"I believe that this attack, more advanced than those in past years, is linked with President Nixon's planned journey to Peking, and that it is meant to show both the Americans and the Chinese that Hanoi too is interested in a settlement of the Indo-Chinese problem", the Prince said.

But, for the moment, it was the Laotians who had to bear the brunt of the war for the control of Vietnam, he added.

Prince Souvanna said there was no immediate military threat to Vientiane, despite the capture by the North Vietnamese of the strategic road junction at Sala Phoukhoun, and the heavy "communist" pressure on the Long Cheng base.

He reproached the North Vietnamese for the "brutality of the attacks" launched in three regions of Laos in the past month.

The Premier told the press conference that it was totally impossible for him to persuade the Americans to halt their bombing of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, as Hanoi demanded.

He said if peaceful methods to solve the problem of Laos failed he still is hoping to reach an understanding with the Pathet Lao — he will ask for more US military assistance.

"We want more US military assistance because dur-

ing the last offensive in the Plain of Jars the Communists used more modern weapons, while we still have the old ones," he said.

The Prime Minister denied reports that regular Thai troops were fighting in Laos, but said there are many Thai

volunteers of Laotian origin fighting side-by-side with Lao troops.

He said he was not in a position to halt the bombings, and he had made this known several years ago to Mr Le Van Hien, North Vietnamese ambassador in Laos. — AFP

Reds Split the Highway Linking Capitals of Laos

BANSON, Laos (UPI) — Communist forces in Laos struck along Highway 13 Wednesday, severing the road linking the royal capital of Luang Prabang and Vientiane, the administrative capital.

The attack along the north-south highway began with a pre-dawn sapper attack Tuesday which destroyed the key bridge at Nam Khen, a town about halfway between Vientiane and Luang Prabang.

A government spokesman said

Communist troop units began infiltrating adjacent to the highway about 20 miles west of this American-operated airstrip 275 miles southwest of the Plain of Jars.

North Vietnamese forces gained full control of the plain on Dec. 20 and since then have increased their pressure on Long Cheng, the secret base operated by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, 21 miles northeast of here.

Some of the secret cryptogra-

phic equipment of Long Cheng reportedly has been removed and the command post there has been split and removed. Part of the command group is now operating here and the rest is at a site about halfway between Banson and Long Cheng.

The attack along highway 13 indicated Communist intent to push west of the Plain of Jars, the government spokesman said.

"They are after bigger game now," said an American source in Vientiane.

This base and airstrip in the Banson valley was a beehive of activity Wednesday, with planes taking off throughout the day to resupply Long Cheng, which in recent days has come under heavy artillery fire.

American sources said they did not know how many casualties the government had in losing the Plain of Jars.

"Including wounded and missing in action, we think it was more than 500," an American source said in Vientiane. But Lao sources said the government may have lost 2,000 soldiers.

The North Vietnamese threw an estimated 15,000 men into the campaign for the plain and since they won it, Long Cheng and its outpost have been under heavy artillery attack.

Situation Worsens In Laos

Compiled From AP and UPI

VIENTIANE, Laos — North Vietnamese forces, continuing their dry season offensive, scored major gains Monday and Tuesday in northern and southern Laos, informed sources said Tuesday.

In the north, Laotian troops were forced to evacuate Phou Cum, 25 miles north of the Plain of Jars, and Sam Thong, southwest of the plain, while a North Vietnamese reconnaissance unit patrolled freely through the once secret base of Long Cheng, the sources said.

In the southern 'panhandle' part of the country, the Laotians suffered heavy casualties Tuesday morning as they retreated from Ban Nhik, leaving the strategic Bolovens Plateau entirely in North Vietnamese hands, the sources said.

Field reports said Laotian and tribal irregulars abandoned Phou Cum after an artillery and ground attack in which 50 North Vietnamese were killed.

An estimated 3,000 to 4,000 civilians, mostly military dependents, started Monday a 50-mile trek through enemy-controlled mountains to the nearest government territory. Three civilians were reported killed and

(Continued on Back Page, Col. 5)

Laos—

(Continued From Page 1)

one soldier wounded in the attack.

The loss of Phou Cum leaves Bouam Long, 15 miles to the southeast, as the only government outpost north of the Plain of Jars.

Sam Thong — once a major refugee center — was abandoned Monday afternoon after a heavy barrage of 130mm artillery, sources said. Thai troops continued to hold the fire base code named Thunder two miles to the east, the sources added.

Military sources said the fact that Sam Thong was attacked from the west indicated the North Vietnamese were trying to encircle Long Cheng, six miles to the southwest.

About 6,000 regular and irregular troops are trying to defend Long Cheng from surrounding high ground where their lines crisscross enemy lines, the sources said. In this tactical confusion, small North Vietnamese units have been able to walk unmolested through the deserted town of Long Cheng, the sources said.

The sources added they could not explain why government troops that sighted North Vietnamese soldiers in Long Cheng Monday did not engage them.

Semiofficial sources said Long Cheng technically has not fallen to the enemy but is no longer serving its original functions.

The headquarters of Laos Military Region Two has been moved to Ban Son, 20 miles to the southwest, while the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency has moved its clandestine operations to a new, undisclosed location.

Government forces abandoned Ban Nhik Monday night after heavy fighting at close quarters and pulled back several miles to the west toward Pakse, the main commercial town in southern Laos.

The Laotian units suffered what was described as heavy casualties in the fighting at Ban Nhik, an important position just 18 miles from Pakse, which is on the Mekong River and about 24 miles from the Thai border.

The abandonment of Ban Nhik came after four days of North Vietnamese assaults, which included more than 1,000 rounds of rocket and mortar fire.

A military source said the fighting there prior to the pull-out was "bloody and at close quarters."

A government source said there were about 200 government casualties, including both dead and wounded, in the fighting Monday.

Enemy casualties were estimated at twice that number. Most of the enemy casualties were caused by bombing.

Laos Seen Yielding Town Near Pakse

VIENTIANE (UPI)—Government military sources said Monday night that Laotian troops are preparing to abandon Ban Nhik, a key government position just 18 miles east of Pakse, the main commercial town in southern Laos.

Ban Nhik has been under increasing pressure from North Vietnamese troops since they overran the Bolovens Plateau town of Paksong two weeks ago.

Ban Nhik's fortified positions have been under heavy mortar, rocket and artillery attack since three battalions of Communist ground troops stormed government positions at Ban Nhik Friday.

Soviet-made tanks also have been used.

Government sources said about 1,000 Laotian soldiers have been surrounded at Ban Nhik since Sunday night. They came under a heavy six-hour

bombardment Monday morning. Heavy casualties resulted.

A Laotian UH34 helicopter carrying wounded soldiers from Ban Nhik was shot down Monday, the sources said.

Sources said the government troops plan to fall back to another defense line on Route 23 at a village called Nan Lao Ngarm, only 11 miles from Pakse.

Acting Defense Minister Sisouk Na Champsack said recently he did not think the North Vietnamese would attempt to capture Pakse because it might bring Thailand, which is across the border just west of Pakse, into the fight.

Sisouk said it was more likely that the Communists were trying to get into position to shell Pakse. He said they could use their long-range artillery and rocket fire to harass and demoralize the people in the town and to stop the government from using its air base in Pakse.

In the north of Laos, North Vietnamese forces continued to shell Long Cheng and Sam Thong, its supporting base which has 105mm and 155mm artillery.

U.S. Families Evacuated From Imperiled Pakse

VIENTIANE, Laos (AP) — The U.S. Embassy announced that more than 70 American women and children were evacuated from the southern Laos town of Pakse in the wake of fighting which virtually pushed government troops off the Bolovens Plateau.

North Vietnamese forces pushed Friday night to within about 20 miles of Pakse, southern Laos' most important city, sources said.

A U.S. Embassy spokesman said there seemed to be "no imminent danger" to Pakse. American dependents were flown to Vientiane "so American men can continue to work without worrying about the safety of their families," the spokesman added.

About 50 Americans work for the U.S. government in Pakse.

Several North Vietnamese battalions supported by five Soviet-

ment task force retreated ten miles to the west, leaving the Communists, in virtually complete control of the strategic Bolovens Plateau, the sources said.

Meanwhile, North Vietnamese forces are keeping up their pressure on the Long Cheng base in northern Laos despite heavy American bombing, informed sources said Sunday.

"Fairly intense" artillery and mortar barrages hit Long Cheng Saturday evening and Sunday morning, the sources said. The shelling was lighter, however, than on the previous two days, the sources added.

The North Vietnamese have adjusted their tactics to minimize the effects of air strikes, the sources said.

Communist barrages are heaviest during the hours of dawn and dusk, when the U.S.

Red-Held Junction Bolstered

VIENTIANE, Laos (UPI) — Communist forces have started moving tanks and trucks along Highway 7 from the Plain of Jars to the key road junction of Sala Phou Khoun 100 miles north of here, military sources said Sunday.

The North Vietnamese and pro-Pathet Lao forces captured Sala Phou Khoun last Friday, cutting Highway 13, the only road between Vientiane and the royal capital of Luang Prabang, 40 miles north of Sala Phou Khoun.

Military sources said trucks have been spotted from the air moving men and materiel to the road junction from the Plain of Jars 40 miles to the east. The plain fell to the Communists

sources also said several had been spotted on Highway 7 and at least two trucks had been seen moving down Highway 13 from Sala Phou Khoun toward government positions further south.

Sources said six trucks were destroyed and eight damaged by Lao Air Force T28 bombardment Saturday and one tank was destroyed along Highway 7.

Military sources said government troops were regrouped about 10 miles southwest and west of the road junction, along Highway 13 leading to Vientiane. Sources said government forces lost at least 17 killed and more than 50 wounded in the fighting Friday at Sala Phou Khoun. They said the troops were pinned in the face of a heavy mortar bombardment and attack.

Sources said North Vietnamese troops still were entrenched on the eastern end of the Plain of Jars Ridge, overlooking the Communist guerrilla base at Long Cheng south of Plain of Jars, after more than a week of fighting.

Sources said government troops, regulars and Thai mercenaries were making "satisfactory progress" against the North Vietnamese position "Charlie," after cleaning out several positions in the center of the Plain of Jars. The Plain of Jars Ridge overlooks the Plain of Jars from less than 10 miles away. A full-scale Communist assault on the town of Long Cheng would be difficult because of the government

Outpost Falls In Laos

VIENTIANE (UPI) — North Vietnamese troops have overrun a government outpost about 11 miles southeast of Long Cheng, military sources said Saturday.

Long Cheng, the headquarters of Gen. Van Pao's Meo tribal irregulars, has been under heavy Communist bombardment for the past week, following Communist takeover of the Plain of Jars to the north. Capture of the outpost to the southeast means there are Communist troops virtually on every side of the base, which has been limited to supplies from the air for some time.

The sources said Communist 130mm guns were continuing to shell Long Cheng.

The sources said North Vietnamese troops also were building up their forces near Thakho, eight miles southeast of Long Cheng.

Many of the 30,000 civilian refugees from Long Cheng were housed in Thakho, and now most of them and villagers from the area have been moved either by land to Vang Vieng, 25 miles to the south, or flown to Vientiane.

Further south, sources said, a North Vietnamese battalion attacked a government position Friday near Ban Nhik, 16 miles west of Paksong. They said North Vietnamese mortars were bombarding Ban Nhik itself, which was surrounded by Communist troops but still in government hands. Paksong fell to the Communists last month.

Government spokesmen said the pro-Communist Pathet Lao have increased their harassing and sabotage activities along Highway 13, which runs from the royal capital of Luang Prabang in the north, through Vientiane and to the far southern border with Cambodia, and thence to Saigon.

They said the Pathet Lao ambushed two public works trucks on the Highway Friday about halfway between here and Luang Prabang, or about 60 miles north of Vientiane. They said four passengers were killed and 11 wounded.

Meritorious Award to F. J. Bell

Francis J. Bell, agronomy advisor in the Laos Mission, was presented a Meritorious Honor Award last month "in recognition for outstanding performance in bringing together the human and technical aspects of increased rice production for the benefit of the Lao people."

Mission Director Charles A. Mann presented the award to Dr. Bell and cited him for his "sustained excellence of performance and devotion to duty and to the people of Laos."

Dr. Bell has lived and worked in Southeast Asia for nearly 20 years. While a student at Cornell University, he studied plant breeding with many Asian students, particularly Thais who have become Ministers and Director Generals in the Thai Government and university officials. The relationships formed at that time has enabled Dr. Bell to assist his Lao counterparts in developing personal contacts. As a result, the exchange of research information and plant materials has been facilitated. Also, increasing numbers of Lao students are being admitted to Thai universities.

Working closely with scientists at the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) in the Philippines, Dr. Bell has been instrumental in sending six Lao agriculturalists to IRRI for a six-month training program in modern rice technology. These officials have returned to teach others the same techniques



FRANCIS J. BELL

used at IRRI. Extension workers have been given brief courses that they in turn pass on to a large number of farmers throughout Laos.

According to his superiors, "Dr. Bell has been the human catalyst that has tied outside research information to the Lao farmers."

Dr. Bell, who joined the Foreign Operations Administration, an AID predecessor, in Bangkok in 1955, has been in Laos since November 1967 and is scheduled for a third tour of duty there. Last year, he was detailed as a consultant to the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development for four months.

Tale of 200 POWs in Laos Caves

VIENTIANE, Laos (AP) — Pathet Lao guerrillas told an Australian free-lance photographer as many as 200 American prisoners are living in caves and tunnels in northern Laos.

John Everingham, who said he was just released by the Pathet Lao after 29 days in captivity, said he had several conversations with his captors about the fate of American pilots shot down and captured in Laos.

"They told me that in Samneua Province the

entire population lives underground because of intense U.S. bombing," Everingham said.

He added that a Pathet Lao officer told him most people can come out to work in the fields when there are no planes around but the prisoners get only one hour of outdoor exercise a day.

"They told me there is a bakery in Samneua to make bread especially for American prisoners because they realize Americans are not used

to a rice diet," the photographer said.

Everingham was captured 17-miles south-east of the royal capital of Luan Prabang.

He said during the first few days of his captivity the Pathet Lao assumed he was an American pilot or spy and sternly lectured him about bombing. But he said he was fed well and not physically mistreated.

Asked how many American prisoners they hold, Pathet Lao troops gave answers ranging (Continued on Back Page, Col. 5)

F4 Jet Downed In Laos

Compiled From AP
and S&S Vietnam Bureau

SAIGON—A U.S. fighter-bomber was shot down over Laos Thursday afternoon, reportedly while flying bombing missions in support of Laotian troops south of the Plain of Jars, military sources said.

The U.S. command confirmed that an F4 Phantom was downed by enemy fire over Laos and that both crewmen were rescued unhurt. It said it could furnish no further details.

It was the first U.S. aircraft reported shot down since Jan. 1 but at least the 13th since the Indochina air war heated up in mid-December.

Downing of the F4 came a day after another Phantom jet shot down a North Vietnamese MIG21 which attacked a U.S. Navy reconnaissance plane 155 miles south of Hanoi.

Meanwhile, in South Vietnam, one crewman was wounded Wednesday afternoon when a U.S. Army AH1 Cobra gunship helicopter crashed and was destroyed 13 miles southeast of Hue, military spokesmen said Thursday. The helicopter was hit by Communist small arms fire while conducting reconnaissance in the area.

Four U.S. Air Force B52s bombed suspected Communist troop locations and storage areas west of Kontum near the Cambodian border during the 24-hour period ending at noon Wednesday, spokesmen said.

U.S. Air Force and Navy fighter-bombers assaulted Communist positions in 10 tactical air strikes in the 24-hour period ending at 6 a.m.

F4 Zaps Mobile Missile Site in Laos Panhandle

SAIGON (UPI)—A U.S. Air Force F4 Phantom jet bomber Tuesday found and blasted a Communist surface-to-air missile (SAM) site in the Laotian panhandle that fired on another U.S. jet Monday in the first such incident of the war, military spokesmen said.

The launcher, believed destroyed by the Tuesday raid, turned out to be a mobile unit firing from a

clearing in the jungle around Tchepone, a central staging area for the Ho Chi Minh Trail, 20 miles west of the Demilitarized Zone, military sources said.

This raised the possibility that American planes, including highly vulnerable, slow-moving B52 bombers, could run into increasing missile fire over the trail, military sources said.

The Communists have never shot down—or even hit in flight—one of the \$8 million strategic bombers. If they were able to bring one down it would be a major propaganda coup and could interfere with the program of heavy air raids the United States mounts against the trail, the sources said.

The SAM 2 missile site bombed Tuesday was believed to be a type that is moved around in three truck-towed vans, including the launcher itself, a radar unit and a power generator, the sources said.

Most missiles fired from inside North Vietnam's southern panhandle also come from these mobile launch sites, the sources said.

200 POWs—

(Continued from Page 1)
from 100 to 200, Everingham said.

The Pathet Lao, unlike the North Vietnamese, have never released a list of prisoners.

The U.S. Embassy in Vientiane lists 263 Americans missing in Laos.

"We have no idea where they are," U.S. consul Richard Rand said. "We think there is a good chance they have been moved to North Vietnam."

Everingham said the Pathet Lao told him all their prisoners are kept in Laos and are well cared for.



A cumbersome forklift proves no great challenge to this 105-pound Laotian girl, one of 29 girls who have successfully completed a special course given by the Laos Mission's Motor Transport Branch.

Laotian Women Keep AID's Wheels Turning

The Motor Transport Branch of the Laos Mission is no longer a man's world. The answer to the manpower shortage has been found in womanpower.

With 515 trucks, 17 buses and 47 passenger vehicles to operate, maintain and repair, the Branch has had difficulty in keeping a sufficient number of mechanics and drivers in the face of military conscription and other priorities.

When a new recruiting drive took place early in 1971, the Branch decided to open its ranks to women to maintain the desired level of trained drivers and mechanics.

By mid-1971, 29 girls had graduated from the Motor Vehicle Branch's program in which they also learned vehicle maintenance. Some of the participants were trained as forklift operators.

In a country where it is still uncommon to see a woman driving her own automobile, people are startled when they see these slender girls driving trucks and forklifts.

Even more unusual, 14 girls have qualified as mechanics of various types. On certain tedious and exacting work such as armature winding, they are even more reliable than the men.

There are no special educational requirements for the trainee recruits. They are given instruction in shop safety, theory and principles of engines and automotive repair. Besides practice in driving, they are instructed by the use of films, lectures, textual aids and materials provided by the National Safety Council.

At first there was some skepticism that this experiment in using women in motor transport and maintenance would work, but they are well accepted, not only by their passengers and supervisors, but also by their male co-workers.



A welding trainee cuts brass on a lathe. Women are filling in the gaps left by a shortage of men in the Motor Transport Branch.

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Thanom, Abrams in Laos talks



GEN ABRAMS:
Concern over
Long Cheng.

GENERAL Creighton Abrams, US Military Commander in Vietnam, has quietly flown into Bangkok and held close consultations with Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn, Chairman of the National Executive Council on possible measures to halt the deteriorating situation in Laos, an informed source reported yesterday.

If the Laotian Government loses its base of Long Cheng the loss would have strategic and political implications for Thailand as well as Laos, South Vietnam and Cambodia, the source said.

United States air power is considered necessary for the

destruction of the 130-mm howitzers shelling Long Cheng from the Plain of Jars which North Vietnamese forces had captured.

The 130-mm artillery with a range of 27 kilometres is superior to the 103-mm and the 160-mm guns with a range of 17 kilometres at the disposal of the hilltribe defenders.

Measures to beat the communist attackers were discussed. American Ambassador Leonard Unger was present.

Prince Souvanna Phouma, the Prime Minister of Laos has expressed grave concern over the situation.

The North Vietnamese forces were making a determined attempt to seize Long Cheng for a military victory with great psychological impact, the source said.

Possession of Long Cheng will strengthen the hands of the Communists in negotiating a political settlement.

Thailand had considered Laos a buffer state between itself and communist North Vietnam. The loss of Long Cheng to the Communists would mean loss of the buffer state, the source said.

Meanwhile, communist troops from Laos have joined

with indigenous hilltribe terrorists in attacks in Thailand's northern areas to keep Thai government forces tied down.

It is hoped that the co-chairmen of the Geneva Conference, Britain and Russia will take urgent steps to reconvene the Geneva Conference to restore peace in Laos.

The source said that all foreign troops should leave Laos and that the conflicting Laotian parties be allowed to negotiate a peaceful settlement on their own.

Thailand hopes for the establishment of a truly neutral Laos, the source said.



Reds move to isolate Luang Prabang

VIENTIANE, Feb. — Communist forces stepped up attacks in Northern Laos during the last 24 hours and today assaulted a government position just 32 kilometres (20 miles) from Pakse in the South.

In the North, Communists have concentrated attacks on the Salaphoukoun junction 60 kilometres southeast of Luang Prabang in efforts to isolate the royal capital, while maintaining pressure on Long Cheng, military sources reported.

Further south, the North Vietnamese have continued their ground assault along Route 23 with attacks at Ban Nhik, five miles from Paksong and where government troops regrouped after losing Paksong.

American dependents have already been evacuated from Pakse, a commercial centre on the Mekong River about 14 kilometres from the Thai border.

Two columns of North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao troops were reported to be converging on Salaphoukoun junction and Defence Ministry spokesman Gen Thongpanh Knocksy said its fall would isolate Luang Prabang.

Highway 13 linking Vientiane with Luang Prabang was still severed today after Communists destroyed a key bridge earlier this week.

A government column moving out of Salaphoukoun yesterday was hit by a heavy mortar attack and forced to halt.

Government forces, falling back before their opponen

advance, have evacuated Phou Vieng, Salaphoukoun's last outpost, 17 kms to the east.

Defenders of Long Cheng have abandoned one of its outposts 10 kms to the northeast, it was also reported.

Sissouk Na Champassak, the acting Defence Minister, has said he does not know if Long Cheng can be held. Secret cryptographic equipment used by Americans already has been removed from the base. —AFP,UPI



'HUMAN WAVES' BELEAGUER LAOTIAN DEFENDERS

VIENTIANE, Tues — Heavy fighting raged today at the big Laotian base at Long Cheng for the fourth straight day as Laotian forces recaptured one position on critical Skyline Ridge overlooking the embattled base, informed sources said.

North Vietnamese troops occupying two other positions in the centre of Skyline Ridge continued to pound Long Cheng Valley with heavy mortar bar-

rages, the sources said.

American officials said they believed the North Vietnamese, relying on frontal, "human wave" assaults against entrenched defenders, have suffered serious losses but casualty figures were not available.

Laotian irregulars yesterday afternoon recaptured a helicopter pad near the northwest end of Skyline Ridge after a full day of close com-

bat, the sources said.

Ten North Vietnamese soldiers were killed in an unsuccessful attack on another helicopter pad about 4 1/4 miles southeast of Long Cheng, the sources added.

Long Cheng, 78 miles northeast of Vientiane, is considered the most important base in northern Laos. Until it was threatened with capture last December it was also headquarters of clandestine US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operations and a refugee centre for some 30,000 displaced Meo tribesmen. It continues to serve as headquarters for Meo General Vang Pao's clandestine army. — AP



See Limit In Laos Fighting

WASHINGTON (AP) — American authorities acknowledge a serious military situation exists in Laos as the result of the North Vietnamese army's dry-season offensive.

But they say it is not expected to spill beyond the present combat area to threaten Vientiane, the administrative capital of Laos, or reach to the Mekong River frontier with Thailand.

State Department spokesman Charles W. Bray said fighting has been intense in the Long Cheng Valley, and the situation is unclear for a key base there of Gen. Vang Pau's Meo guerrillas.

According to U.S. estimates, however, the North Vietnamese will not attempt to drive to the Mekong because it would require a greater commitment of North Vietnamese troops.

There are an estimated 80,000 North Vietnamese in the country now, with the largest number in the South where they are dominating the Bolovens Plateau and guarding the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

According to intelligence reports received here, the North Vietnamese have taken control of the fighting in Laos, and it has become an all-North Vietnam show. The Communist-led Pathet Lao forces who served as a veneer for the North Vietnamese have been discarded, according to these reports.

There have been a number of Pathet Lao defectors recently.

Laos Retakes Ridge Near Beefed Up Long Cheng

VIENTIANE (UPI) — Laotian reinforcements flown into Long Cheng last week have broken out of the beleaguered military complex and retaken the central "Skyline" ridge a mile and a quarter to the north, informed military sources said Saturday.

They said fighting was continuing, with government troops trying to push the North Viet-

namese from the ridge further east.

The sources said North Vietnamese artillery and mortars were continuing to shell Long Cheng, the headquarters 150 miles north of here of the Meo tribal guerrillas financed by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency.

The sources said Gen. Vang

Pao, the Meo commander, flew into Long Cheng Saturday morning. A number of giant U.S. helicopters were seen flying from Vientiane Saturday, presumably to transport troops or supplies to Long Cheng.

The sources said fighting was continuing in the Long Cheng valley, infiltrated last week by North Vietnamese. But they said the chances of the government holding Long Cheng had vastly improved over the past 48 hours.

Long Cheng has been virtually surrounded since the North Vietnamese took the Plain of Jars to the north a few weeks ago. All supplies have had to be flown in.

The sources said Long Cheng was reinforced several days ago by at least three battalions of Lao regulars and Thai volunteers.

They said four mixed Lao-Thai battalions were committed to the battle for Skyline ridge. The North Vietnamese resisted strongly and fighting was fierce. There were no casualty figures available.

Reliable sources said Saturday an Air America C123 transport plane was hit by Red Chinese anti-aircraft fire 190 miles northwest of Vientiane, where the Chinese are building an east-west road network.

The sources said the "kicker" — the crewmember who pushes out supplies from the chartered planes for government forces and irregulars — was hurt, but

BULLETIN RED PLANES BOMB LAOS

VIENTIANE—Two North Vietnamese aircraft have bombed and strafed the village of Bouamlong, about 30 kilometres northeast of the Plain of Jars, Laotian military sources revealed here yesterday.

They said that two Soviet-built Antonov aircraft killed six people and injured 10 in the attack three days ago. The sources said that after the bombing, which destroyed 70 houses, the aircraft strafed the area with machine-guns.

2

The village of Ban Gnik, 33 kilometers east of Pakse along Route 23, was recaptured by government troops about ten days ago after being held by the North Vietnamese since mid-January.

Farther south, about 52 kilometers down the Mekong River from Pakse, communist troops attacked and occupied the village of Soukhouma, forcing a small local self-defense unit to withdraw. Other government units, including two companies of former Pathet Lao soldiers who rallied to the government, were dispatched to the threatened area.

Two villages in Laos were hit by heavy North Vietnamese rockets. Nine rockets impacted in the northeastern part of Seno, some 30 kilometers north-east of Savannakhet in south central Laos, wounding six people. Other rockets fell on the village of Xieng Ngeun, about 15 kilometers south of the royal capital of Luang Prabang, wounding three people and destroying four houses.

Small unit contacts continued in the vicinity of Long Tieng in north central Laos. Two big North Vietnamese field guns of Soviet production were reported destroyed by air strikes about 14 kilometers northeast of Long Tieng.

LAOS (USINFO)--Heavy fighting continued Wednesday and Thursday for control of the important ridge overlooking the Lao defense base of Long Tieng in north central Laos.

Lao military authorities describe the situation along the ridge as "fluid" with several hilltop positions changing hands, sometimes twice a day. More precisely, they say, some positions are occasionally abandoned by government forces because of intense North Vietnamese mortar and artillery fire, then are later reoccupied.

North Vietnamese gunners also continued intermittent shelling of the Long Tieng valley, in particular the area of the base airstrip, which remains closed to fixed-wing aircraft.

A few North Vietnamese tanks were sighted about ten kilometers northwest of Long Tieng. Occasional small unit skirmishes were reported to the east and southeast of the base.

A government task force operating several kilometers to the northeast of the Plain of Jars reported encountering stiffening enemy resistance, with the North Vietnamese bringing tanks into action.

Another government task force operating farther south also had a few contacts with North Vietnamese troops in an area about six kilometers northwest of Xieng Khouangville, east of the plain.

In southern Laos, government troops engaged in a sweep operation on the Bolovens Plateau, reported a series of heavy clashes with North Vietnamese units.

La nu **Captured Aussie Newsman** al **Released by Pathet Lao**

VIENTIANE (AP) — An Australian journalist arrived in Vientiane Thursday after spending 29 days in northern Laos as a captive of the Pathet Lao, who, he said, treated him well.

John Everingham, 22, from Brisbane, Australia, said he was released unharmed after satisfying his captors that he was not an American spy.

Everingham was captured about 17 miles southeast of the royal capital of Luang Prabang after he had taken a wrong trail while wandering through remote Laotian villages, he said.

Everingham, in apparent good health and high spirits, gave the following account of his captivity: "I was walking along a trail when I bumped into two Pathet Lao soldiers. They led me at gunpoint to a nearby village where I was questioned."

Everingham said for the first few days he was suspected of being an American pilot or a spy and was closely watched while being kept constantly on the move.

After about two weeks of traveling on foot and by truck through the rugged mountains of northern Laos, Everingham said, he settled down in a guerrilla camp near Moug Soui, 107 miles north of Vientiane.

"I lived better than the officers," Everingham said. "They gave me the best food, the best place to sleep and were always

asking me if I needed anything else."

Everingham, who speaks fluent Lao, said the morale of Pathet Lao troops seemed to be high. "They are sure they are winning and they do not take the government side seriously. They just laugh at government troops camped on hilltops waiting to be attacked."

Heavy bombing of northern Laos by both the U.S. and Laotian Air Forces has affected the civilian population more than the Pathet Lao troops, Everingham said. "All traditional villages are destroyed," he said. "I walked through dozens of new villages hidden deep in the forest where they can not be seen from the air. People were very hostile. They shouted at me about the bombing because at first they thought I was a captured American pilot."

During one month of living with troops, Everingham said, he saw only one soldier wounded by bombing. A Laotian Air Force T28 scored a direct hit with fragmentation bombs on the camp he was in, he said.

"We all got into caves but there was not enough room because of the people who had come to see me. One soldier who did not move fast enough was hit in the face and chest with pellets," he said.

Guerrillas can identify planes by sound and know when to take cover, he said. "Their camps

are small and well-hidden, so they say it is very rare for a Pathet Lao guerrilla to be killed by bombing.

"There were medics everywhere," Everingham said. "They always wanted to make sure I was all right."

Everingham claimed the Pathet Lao eat better than the government troops in the field. "They have Chinese canned food — vegetables, fish, meat — it was delicious," he said.

Everingham said he saw no evidence of conscription in Pathet Lao areas. Most young men and women are armed and uniformed but, he said, he met some young people in civilian clothes, who explained to him they did not like to fight. When asked, the soldiers often told him they joined the Pathet Lao to avenge the death of relatives killed by bombing, he said.

Everingham said a group of six North Vietnamese soldiers visited him near Moug Soui. "They were very friendly and asked me a lot of questions about life in Saigon," he said. Everingham worked in Saigon before moving to Laos two years ago.

The Pathet Lao troops told Everingham they resent the Vientiane government claims that North Vietnam dominates the Pathet Lao. One guerrilla reportedly told him "We are fighting for independence and we do not want new bosses."

CIA-Backed Laotians Face

By Laurence Stern

Washington Post Foreign Service

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 nob-shaped mountain outcropping poked up 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 wrestled to a temporary standstill just 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 air strip. 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 downward along the hilltops to the landing strip of 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 of Americans." I agreed and complied.

On the ground, Gen. Vang Pao, the gritty Meo commander of the irregulars, greeted his visitor with a surprisingly shy smile and handshake. His two visiting sons, Van Su, 3, and Cha Leune, 4, clown 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 bigger than what we have here—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 materiel. It is getting very difficult to hold the situation."

Haze Hurts

"Yes, we have American air strikes. But look at that haze." He raised one 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 too far 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 our last B-52 strike just last week out along there." 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 nine days." He shook his head sadly.

World's Best

By the admission of some of the highest-ranking Americans in Vietnam, Vang Pao's guerrillas are facing in the North Vietnamese units across Skyline Ridge perhaps 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 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 individual. Godley, who monitors the military conflict 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 the 2,200-foot airstrip. Outgoing artillery pounded persistently at fixed targets 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 ad-

monish 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 outer boundaries of the airport. "We managed 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 organizing 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 remarked with a smile 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

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