

The CIA and the "Secret" War in Laos:
The Battle for Skyline Ridge, 1971-72

by

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Between December 1971 and May 1972, one of the great battles of the Vietnam War took place in northern Laos when over 20 battalions of the North Vietnamese army assaulted positions held by some 10,000 Lao, Thai, and Hmong defenders. Yet few people ever have heard of the Battle for Skyline Ridge. Press coverage of the engagement was slight, and public interest - at least in the United States - was minimal. Historians of the Vietnam War also have ignored this major battle, perhaps because it had limited impact on the outcome of the war. Still, the Battle for Skyline Ridge deserves to be remembered. The culmination of efforts by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency to direct a major and lengthy war in Asia, it was an impressive - if temporary - victory for the anti-Communist forces in Laos.

By 1971, the no-longer-secret war in Laos had been going on for more than a decade.¹ Prior to the Geneva Agreements of July 1962 on the neutrality of Laos, United States military personnel had taken the leading role in training and advising indigenous forces. Indeed, under the terms of the Geneva Agreements, which called for the removal of all foreign military personnel from Laos, the United States withdrew 666 individuals.² The Central Intelligence Agency, by contrast, had only nine paramilitary specialists, assisted by 99 Thai Special Forces-type members of the Police Aerial Reconnaissance Unit (PARU), assigned to train and support Hmong tribal forces in the northern part of

Laos, which constituted the Agency's main program in the country.³

When fighting broke out again in Laos in 1963 and 1964, officials in Washington considered reintroducing a sizable number of U.S. military personnel into the country to train and advise the Royal Lao Army. Leonard Unger, the American ambassador in Vientiane, opposed the idea. "As will be recalled," he cabled the State Department in June 1964, "experience in '61-62 with MAAG [Military Assistance and Advisory Group] was not a happy one. MAAG and White Star [Special Forces] teams did a highly commendable job under difficult circumstances, but their experience demonstrated that it is almost impossible to put any real spine into FAR [Forces Armee Royale or Royal Lao Army]."⁴

Acting upon Unger's recommendation, Washington decided to maintain the thin fiction of the Geneva Agreements - which the Communist Pathet Lao and their North Vietnamese backers had ignored but never formally repudiated. The ineffective Royal Lao Army would be given a minimum of support. At the same time, the Central Intelligence Agency was assigned responsibility to train, advise, and support Hmong forces in northern Laos, and to recruit, train, advise, and support volunteer Lao troops in the southern part of the country. The CIA presence in Laos was to remain small. As Unger's successor, William L. Sullivan, explained, Unger was a "most reluctant militarist and took

care in establishing the paramilitary operation to be sure it was designed to be reversible. Consequently, only a small portion of it was actually present in Laos, and all its supporting elements were housed in Thailand, under a secret agreement with the Thai."⁵

Between 1964 and 1967, the CIA-supported Hmong army in northern Laos, the main area of conflict, fought a highly successful guerrilla war against a mixed force of Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese troops. The high point of this phase of the war came in the summer of 1967. Royal Lao Army and Hmong units had blunted the enemy's dry season offensive of winter-spring 1966-67, causing local CIA officials to issue an optimistic appraisal of the situation in Laos. Hmong forces, a CIA Intelligence Information Cable argued, had gained the upper hand in the war: "They now have the option of attempting a permanent change in the tactical balance of power in North Laos."⁶

Unfortunately, the North Vietnamese recognized the danger. Beginning in January 1968, Hanoi introduced major new forces into Laos and relegated the Pathet Lao to a support role for the remainder of the war. By March, the CIA estimated that there were 35,000 North Vietnamese regular troops in Laos - and the number would continue to grow.⁷

The fighting in Laos took on a more conventional character, characterized by engagements between large units.

This type of warfare took a heavy toll on the Hmong. In the first five months of 1968, the Hmong lost over 1,000 men, including many top commanders. A recruiting drive turned up only 300 replacements, and most of these were under the age of 14 or over 35.⁸ And the situation only grew worse. By April 1970, the CIA acknowledged that Hmong losses had crippled the effectiveness of the tribal forces. The Hmong had fought well, a CIA estimate observed, but "they are battle weary and their losses over the past year or so have exceeded their capability to replace them."⁹

Lao authorities, recognizing the declining strength of the Hmong, in June 1970 asked the Thai government to supply regular troops to fend off the North Vietnamese. While the Thais were anxious to stop the North Vietnamese short of the Mekong River, they were reluctant to send regular army units into Laos and thereby take a more prominent role in the war. Instead, officials in Bangkok agreed to recruit "volunteer" battalions which would be led by regular army officers and NCOs. The cost of the units would be underwritten by the U.S. government.¹⁰

On the eve of the Battle for Skyline Ridge, 1971-72, the CIA's presence had grown far beyond Ambassador Unger's minimalist objectives due to the expanding nature of the war, but it still remained small, especially inside Laos. According to one knowledgeable CIA official, the total number of people at Udorn and inside Laos - "including all

support personnel, the contract wives, and some military detailee technicians" - never exceeded 225. This included some 50 case officers.¹¹

At the top of the command structure for the conduct of the war stood Ambassador G. McMurtrie Godley. By presidential directive, the ambassador was responsible for "overall direction, coordination and supervision" of all military operations in Laos. Godley, by all accounts, brought a great deal of interest and enthusiasm to the job. He presided over daily "operations meetings" at the embassy, lasting from 9 A.M. to 10:30 A.M. (or later), at which he received detailed briefings from military and intelligence personnel on developments in the war over the preceding 24 hours.¹²

Godley delegated responsibility for the tactical conduct of the war to his CIA station chief, B. Hugh Tovar. An experienced and respected intelligence officer who had served with the Office of Strategic Services during World War II and had been a member of a small OSS team that had operated in Laos at the end of the war, Tovar preferred to exert a general supervision over military affairs and allow his subordinates to handle the operational details.¹³

In conformity with Ambassador Unger's original organizational scheme, the primary CIA headquarters for the conduct of the war - in effect Tovar's "executive agent" - was not in Laos but in Thailand.¹⁴ Located in a two-story

block building adjacent to an aircraft parking ramp at Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base, the 4802d Joint Liaison Detachment was the CIA's command center for military operations in Laos. In charge of the 4802d was Lloyd "Pat" Landry, a paramilitary specialist who had been involved in Laotian affairs for more than a decade. "As a boss," one junior officer recalled, "he had a reputation of being blunt and having the capability to make hard decisions and sticking to them."¹⁵

Landry's chief of operations was George C. Morton, a retired Green Beret colonel who earlier had "laid the foundations of the Special Forces effort in Vietnam."¹⁶ Other CIA officers oversaw air operations, photographic and communications intelligence, order-of-battle assessments, and coordinated military operations and requirements with 7/13 Air Force headquarters, also located at Udorn.¹⁷ Finally, Landry had excellent rapport with General Vitoon Yasawatdi ("Dhep"), commander of "Headquarters 333," the Thai organization in charge of their forces in Laos.¹⁸

Lines of authority ran from Udorn to CIA regional headquarters in Laos at Pakse, Savannakhet, Long Tieng, Luang Prabang, and Nam Lieu. The most important of the five subunits was Long Tieng, the major logistical and operational base in Military Region II, and headquarters of Major General Vang Pao, Hmong tribal leader and commander of the Region.¹⁹ Joseph R. Johnson, the CIA's chief of unit at

Long Tieng, oversaw some twenty or so paramilitary and support personnel who advised Hmong and Thai units. He also directed the activities of Air America, a CIA-owned airline, and Continental Air Services, a contract air carrier. His chief of operations, Jerome A. Daniels, who had the confidence of Vang Pao, was responsible for coordinating military activities in the Region, especially those relating to the Hmong. Major Jesse E. Scott commanded the U.S. Air Force's Air Operations Center at Long Tieng and (nominally) the ten U.S. Air Force forward air controllers, who used the radio call sign "Raven."²⁰

The United States in 1971 was in the process of withdrawing from Vietnam. President Richard M. Nixon had proclaimed in 1969 that Asia boys should fight Asian wars. By the end of 1970, U.S. troop strength was down to 280,000, and declining rapidly. With regard to Laos - where Asia boys were fighting Asian wars - the Nixon administration adopted a defensive posture. Like Kennedy before him, Nixon wanted a neutral Laos that would serve as a buffer between pro-Western Thailand and the aggressive intentions of North Vietnam and China. However, it was clear by 1971 that Laotian neutrality would have to be achieved without a major commitment of U.S. power.

Early in 1971, the Royal Lao government ordered General Vang Pao to seize as much territory as possible in Military Region II before Congressional restraints reduced available

U.S. air sorties to 32 per day after July 1. Vang Pao launched a major offensive in June. Effectively using his air mobility and tactical air resources, the Hmong leader captured the Plaine des Jarres (PDJ), a strategic area that had changed hands several times in the past. In order to blunt the anticipated enemy dry season offensive, which usually began in December or January, it was decided to establish five major artillery strong points on the PDJ. Manned and defended by Thai troops, these mutually supporting bases were intended to attract the enemy's attention. The NVA would assault these fixed positions - and be destroyed by artillery fire and tactical air power.²¹

As the time neared for the expected enemy offensive, intelligence reports coming into the CIA operations center at Udorn grew ominous. Hanoi, it had learned, had appointed one of their senior army commanders - General Le Truong Tan - to direct the year's dry season offensive. Overhead photography revealed a growing number of troops and supplies moving along Route 6 toward the PDJ, including large covered trailers. Although B-52s and "fast movers" were targeted against the road, the traffic continued.²²

Nonetheless, there a general feeling of confidence that the enemy offensive could be stopped. James E. Parker, Jr., a newly arrived intelligence officer who had been assigned as desk officer for Military Region II, inspected the Thai artillery bases in early December and came away impressed.

The firebases, with their 105mm and 155mm guns, were placed so that each base could be protected by artillery fire from two or three adjacent positions. Visiting the northern-most position, Parker received an optimistic appraisal of the situation from its Thai commander. The position, he said, was "impregnable," with its three inter-connected rings of firing positions, bunkers, well-fortified mortar pits, barbed and concertina wire, and mines. Local artillery, he boasted, was available within seconds; flareships, gunships, and tactical air support were on call.²³

December 15 and 16 saw only light ground activity on the PDJ. On December 17, smoke enveloped the area during the daylight hours, cutting short resupply flights to the Thai strong points. At 1835 hours that evening, all hell broke loose. Using for the first time in Laos Soviet-made long-range 130mm guns that far outranged the Thai artillery (16 miles versus 9 miles), the NVA hit all Thai positions simultaneously. Tank-supported infantry then broke through the defensive rings around the bases. By the next morning, the northern-most position had fallen, and the other bases were under heavy pressure.²⁴

As the enemy attack continued during December 18 and 19, tactical air support - upon which the entire defensive scheme had been premised - was noticeable by its absence. With Vang Pao and the Thais screaming for air support, the CIA urged 7/13 Air Force at Udorn to supply the desperately

needed sorties - all to no avail. Finally, Ambassador Godley contacted 7th Air Force headquarters in Saigon. He was told that all available U.S. aircraft were involved in search-and-rescue operations.²⁵

On the afternoon of December 18, an F-4 supporting the Thai positions on the PDJ had been shot down by a MIG-21, the first air-to-air loss in Laos. Two other F-4s engaged the MIG as it fled toward the North Vietnamese border. Caught up in the chase, the F-4s ran out of fuel, and the four crew members ejected. The following day, another F-4 had been brought down east of the PDJ by anti-aircraft fire. The Air Force had launched a massive SAR operation for these downed crew members, which drew off the tactical air resources that otherwise would have gone into the battle on the PDJ.²⁶

Time ran out for the Thai defenders. By the morning of December 20, all artillery strong points had fallen. The surviving Thai troops headed south in disarray, pursued by the NVA. Continental Air Services pilot Edward Dearborn, who had been airdropping supplies to the Thai positions, reported the scene: "By 1300 local, our efforts were confined to picking up the wounded and survivors of the fire bases. Most of them were working their way to LS-15 [Ban Na]. A pitiful sight from two weeks before. The majority were shell shocked and most were suffering from wounds, exposure, or shock in one form or another."²⁷

The North Vietnamese pushed into the mountainous terrain south of the PDJ and headed toward Long Tieng, the last bastion between the enemy and the Mekong River. While Hmong and Thai defenders strengthened their positions along Skyline Ridge, the key terrain feature that overlooked the Long Tieng valley, tactical airstrikes - once again available - slowed but could not stop the enemy advance.²⁸

At 1530 hours on December 31, 1971, North Vietnamese gunners opened fire on Long Tieng. The shelling, which included rounds from the dreaded 130mm guns, continued intermittently throughout the night, causing heavy damage to installations in the valley.

The ground assault against Skyline began a few days later. An estimated 19,000 North Vietnamese troops were thrown into the battle. They were opposed by a mixed force of some 10,000 Hmong, Thai, and Lao defenders. The NVA offensive went well at first. In hard fighting, the enemy captured several key positions along Skyline Ridge and took control of Sam Thong, the former headquarters of the USAID mission in northern Laos, which was linked to Long Tieng by a mountainous road.

The CIA brought in Thai reinforcements, together with several 1,200-man units of irregular troops from southern Laos, considered to be the government's elite force. By late January, the CIA-led Lao troops, in bitter - often hand-to-hand - fighting, had retaken Skyline from the North

Vietnamese, at a cost of one-third to one-half of their effective strength. Thanks to their efforts, Long Tieng was placed at least temporarily out of the danger - if not out of range of the 130mm guns.²⁹

While the Air Force hunted the well camouflaged artillery pieces - and found several - the defenders of Long Tieng dug in deeper and waited for the next assault. It took nearly two months for the North Vietnamese - their supply lines harassed by B-52s, tactical air strikes, and Hmong ambushes - to bring up sufficient material to stage the expected attack.

In mid-March 1972, the NVA once again tried to push the defenders off Skyline. This time, the enemy planned to use heavy T-34 tanks, bringing them in along the road from Sam Thong. Michael E. Ingham, CIA officer in charge of Thai forces in Military Region II, had learned of the enemy's intentions from a NVA prisoner. He had his men place anti-tank mines along the road in front of their main defensive position. As it turned out, NVA sappers removed most of the mines, except for the two closest to the Thai position. On March 30, two T-34 lead tanks hit these mines and were immobilized, effectively blocking the road to Long Tieng.³⁰

Heavy fighting along Skyline Ridge continued into the last days of April, with key positions changing hands several times. Unable to obtain their objective, the NVA finally removed a division from the area and sent it to

support the Easter offensive against South Vietnam. On May 19, President Nixon congratulated Ambassador Godley: "The Communist dry season in Laos has been blunted this year, largely through the tireless efforts of your Missions. You have done a tremendous job under difficult conditions."³¹

Ambassador Godley certainly deserved President Nixon's accolades. His CIA-led forces had scored an impressive victory over a capable and determined enemy. For a time, U.S. officials believed that this military success might contribute to the creation of a neutral Laos. For example, CIA Director William Colby, in awarding an Intelligence Star to one of the case officers who directed the Lao irregular forces, commented in February 1974: "I think you made a major contribution not only to the battle, but also to the successful outcome in Laos. That was a very sticky period. And the situation as Long Tieng was considered a critical one." The recent conclusion of a ceasefire agreement and "steps toward achieving some kind of coalition government," Colby concluded, "is in good part a credit to your work."³² Unfortunately, the coalition government proved only an brief interlude. The Communists soon took control of the country.

The CIA, nonetheless, remained proud of its efforts in Laos. As CIA Director Richard Helms later observed: "This was a major operation for the agency. . . . It took manpower, it took specially-qualified manpower, it was

dangerous, it was difficult." The CIA, he contended, "did a superb job."³³

Helms had a point. Criticized following the Bay of Pigs fiasco in 1961 for its inability to conduct large-scale military operations, the CIA directed the war in Laos for more than a decade - and fought the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao to a standstill. The cost - at least in American lives - had been small: eight CIA case officers were killed during the war, four in aircraft accidents and four as a result of enemy fire.³⁴

Lao, Thai, and Hmong losses, of course, were much higher. The Hmong suffered most, both during and after the war. As Douglas S. Blaufarb, CIA station chief in Vientiane, 1962-64, has observed, whatever the Hmong gained by associating with the United States, "it certainly was not worth the high price they paid." But, Blaufarb wisely adds, criticism of the U.S. alliance with the Hmong involves the application of "a lavish hindsight without regard to the realities of the time it was undertaken."³⁵

In any event, the anti-communist forces in Laos won the Battle for Skyline Ridge. However, as in Vietnam, victory on the battlefield did not mean much in the end. It merely delayed the final outcome of the war.

Notes

1. The best general accounts of the war are Charles A. Stevenson, The Under of Nowhere: American Policy toward Laos since 1954 (Boston, 1972), and Arthur J. Dommen, Conflict in Laos: The Politics of Neutralization (revised edition, New York, 1971).
2. North Vietnam, in contrast, formally withdrew only 40 of its estimated 6,000 troops in Laos at the time of the cease-fire. Statement of Ambassador G. McMurtrie Godley, July 22, 1971, in U.S. Senate, Committee on Armed Services, Hearings on Fiscal Year 1972 Authorization for Military Procurement, 92nd Congress, 1st Session (Washington, 1971), p. 4270. See also Norman B. Hannah, The Key to Failure: Laos and the Vietnam War (Lanham, MD, 1987), p. 59.
3. Edward G. Lansdale to Maxwell D. Taylor, "Resources for Unconventional Warfare, S.E. Asia," n.d. [July 1961], The Pentagon Papers (New York Times edition, New York, 1971), pp. 130-38.
4. Unger to the Secretary of State, June 15, 1964, Declassified Documents Reference System (DDRS), 1989: 2100.
5. William L. Sullivan, Obbligato (New York, 1984), p. 210.
6. Central Intelligence Agency, Intelligence Information Cable IN 19395, July 29, 1967, DDRS, 1992: 3089.
7. Central Intelligence Agency, Special National Intelligence Estimate 58-68, March 21, 1968, DDRS, 1989: 1865.
8. Robert Shaplen, Time Out of Hand: Revolution and Reaction in Southeast Asia (New York, 1968), pp. 347-48.
9. Central Intelligence Agency, Office of National Estimates, "Stocktaking in Indochina," April 17, 1970, DDRS, 1977: 270C. The Hmong continued to take severe casualties. In 1971, they suffered 2,259 killed and 5,775 wounded. See Arnold R. Isaacs, Without Honor: Defeat in Vietnam and Cambodia (Baltimore, 1983), p. 169.
10. Theodore Shackley, The Third Option (New York, 1981), pp. 122-24.
11. Information from a retired intelligence officer who was in a position to have a accurate count of CIA presence in Thailand and Laos. William Colby, Lost Victory (Chicago,

1989), p. 198, states: "The total number of CIA personnel who support this effort was between 300 and 400." This number seems to be too high.

12. A profile of Godley appeared in the New York Times, July 12, 1973. See also the informative staff report of a visit to Laos by James G. Lowenstein and Richard M. Moose: U.S. Senate, Subcommittee on U.S. Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad of the Committee on Foreign Relations, Laos: April 1971, 92nd Congress, 1st Session (Washington, 1971), p. 2.

13. Interview with B. Hugh Tovar, March 13, 1992.

14. As noted by Senate staffers Lowenstein and Moose, following a visit to Southeast Asia in January 1972, Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base was "the most important operational military nerve center in Thailand." U.S. Senate, Subcommittee on U.S. Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad of the Committee on Foreign Relations, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia: January 1972, 92nd Congress, 2nd Session (Washington, 1972), p. 12. My portrait of CIA activities is drawn from interviews and correspondence with several retired intelligence officers.

15. James E. Parker, Jr., to the author, December 1992.

16. Shelby L. Stanton, Green Berets at War: U.S. Army Special Forces in Southeast Asia, 1956-1975 (Novato, CA, 1985), pp. 48, 52-53, 62.

17. On U.S. Air Force activities in Laos, see Earl H. Tilford, Jr., Setup: What the Air Force Did in Vietnam and Why (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL, 1991).

18. General Vitoon Yasawatdi's activities are discussed in Rueng Yote Chantrakiri, The Thoughts and Memories of the Man Known as Dhep 333 (Bangkok, 1992). I am indebted to the Office of the Vice President for Research at the University of Georgia for a grant to have this volume translated from the Thai by Kris Petcharawises.

19. On Vang Pao's background, see Keith Quincy, Hmong: History of a People (Cheney, WA, 1988), pp. 160-94.

20. V. H. Gallacher and Hugh N. Ahmann interview with Jesse E. Scott, April 6, 1973, U.S. Air Force Historical Research Center (USAFHRC), Maxwell AFB, AL. See also Christopher Robbins, The Ravens (New York, 1987).

21. William W. Lofgren and Richard R. Sexton, "Air War in Northern Laos, 1 April - 30 November 1971," U.S. Air Force CHECO Report, June 22, 1973, USAFHRC; Jane Hamilton-Merritt, Tragic Mountains: The Hmong, the Americans, and the Secret War for Laos, 1942-1992 (Bloomington, IN, 1993), pp. 266-76.
22. Kenneth J. Conboy, "Vietnam and Laos: A Recent History of Military Cooperation," Indochina Report, 19 (April-June 1989): 1-15.
23. Parker to the author, December 1992.
24. The progress of the battle can be followed in the daily situation reports by Air America operations managers Thomas H. Sullivan and Jerome S. Connor, located in the Sullivan collection, Air America Archives, University of Texas at Dallas.
25. Tovar interview, March 13, 1992.
26. New York Times, December 21 and 22, 1971.
27. Edwin B. Dearborn, "Notes on PDJ Battle, December 17-20," December 23, 1971. Copy courtesy of Edwin B. Dearborn.
28. Major General Alton D. Slay, chief of staff for operations at 7th Air Force, End-of-Tour Report, USAFHRC, is more optimistic in appraising the important role of the Air Force.
29. Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia: January 1972, p. 18.
30. Michael E. Ingham to the author, January 7, 1993.
31. A copy of Nixon's message is in the microfilm collection of Air America records in the author's possession.
32. Colby presentation to Elias P. Chavez, February 8, 1974. Copy of presentation courtesy of Elias P. Chavez.
33. Ted Gittinger interview with Richard Helms, September 16, 1981, Oral History Program, Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, TX.
34. Two of the four intelligence officers who were killed in aircraft accidents - Louis O'Jibway and Edward Johnson - died when an Air America helicopter flew into the Mekong River on August 20, 1965, while en route from Nam Lieu, Laos, to Udorn, Thailand. The "Book of Honor" at CIA Headquarters incorrectly lists O'Jibway's death as 1966. In addition to the eight case officers, three CIA employees,

serving as Air America crew members, were killed in the crash of C-46 on August 13, 1961, and are memorialized by three stars, without names, in the "Book of Honor."

35. Douglas Blaufarb, Counterinsurgency Era (New York, 1977), p. 168.