

10/14/72 10:10 AM

GIs at a Secret Base—Plenty of Time

By Michael Morrow
Dispatched News Service International

RAMASUN, Northeastern Thailand — The modest defenses of this secret intelligence-gathering base are a source of worry to the U.S. soldiers stationed here, who also feel that there is a danger of a world-wide security compromise if the base ever falls.

The base, just 5½ miles south of the American air base at Udorn, is on the highway that runs from the Laotian border to Bangkok.

On base is a maze of wire and steel rods laid out over an area larger than a football field. Local people call it "the elephant cage." It houses one of the most important intelligence-gathering operations the U.S. military is conducting in the Indochina war.

An electronically tuned, all-frequency, all-directional antenna, the "elephant cage" picks up walkie-talkie conversations in North Vietnam or China as easily as a pocket transistor picks up local radio stations. The central listening post for Amer-

ican radio intelligence operations in mainland Southeast Asia, it is also one of the most vulnerable American military installations in Thailand. Ramasun is beginning to sweat the possibility of attack.

Ramasun's more formal name is the Seventh Radio Research Field Station. It is about one mile by two in area. In addition to its giant antenna, it has permanent concrete buildings and a staff of about 1,200.

Warnings on Migs

In addition to being a radio-monitoring post, Ramasun is also a communications center, dispatching radio traffic throughout the war theater. One of its most important roles is providing American fighter-bomber pilots attacking North Vietnam with almost instant intelligence about the location and battle plans of airborne Mig fighters, as well as the position of friendly aircraft.

Manned by an elite crew of Morse code interpreters, linguists, cryptanalysts and other intelligence specialists

The Washington Post

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 14, 1972

from the Army Security Agency and Air Force Security Service, Ramasun is one of the most important examples of secondary American military installations located in Thailand.

Despite its importance, Ramasun has long had only modest defenses: Until recently just a cyclone fence patrolled by civilian Thai guards, and no bunkers. There were no practice alerts.

In the last six months, however, things have begun to change. Practice alerts have been called about twice a month, and M-16 rifles have been broken out.

Approximately 20 bunkers, manned by GIs during alerts, have been built around the perimeter. A second cyclone fence is being built inside the original one.

A quick-reaction force made up of GI volunteers from the base is being trained. The civilian Thai guards have been issued fatigues and helmets.

A Silent Commander

Col. J. J. McFadden, American base commander, refused to see me to explain the increased defenses or answer other questions. A notice was also put up in the operations building at Ramasun instructing anyone who might meet me to answer "no comment" to any questions I might ask.

However, according to sources involved in security preparations at Ramasun, the command is increasingly worried about a sapper attack. (A sapper is a specially trained infantryman used to infiltrate fortified positions. Once he is inside, his mis-

to Worry

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sion is to blow up planes, bunkers, buildings, and often installations with explosives.) Cement mortar pads have reportedly been discovered immediately south and east of the base.

R a m a s u n ' s relatively small size plus its important mission make it a likely object of attack.

"If someone knocked out the elephant cage," said a member of the headquarters staff, "it would stop the air war; if the box (a long, white windowless building of concrete block in which top-secret operations are housed) fell, it would compromise security worldwide."

Despite improved defenses, there's much skepticism about Ramasun's ability to weather a serious sapper raid. Army Security Agency

regulations to the contrary, most army personnel (who outnumber Air Force people about 6 to 1) still live off base.

Not Lawnmower-Proof

The quick-reaction force is under the direction of a sergeant trained as a Chinese linguist. No sooner were the field phone wires laid to the bunkers of one company than they were cut by a lawnmower. The new defense plan calls for the wires to be strung once an attack begins—a task that took six hours to get half done in one practice attempt.

But the biggest obstacle to respectable defenses at Ramasun may be the men who man it, for the most part young enlisted men who have been selected from the

See RAMASUN, E5, Col. 1

RAMASUN, From E1

brightest and best-educated Army and Air Force recruits. Most have had no combat experience, and many abhor violence.

Commenting on the plan to make a quick-reaction force out of non-infantry personnel at the base, one sergeant, sharing responsibility for base security, said: "You're trying to make soldiers out of a group of cooks, clerks and bottle-washers. All they're going to learn is enough to get themselves killed. When one of these guys gets shot at for the first time, he is going to hit the ditch — and that's the last you're going to hear of him."

A young soldier due to get out of the Army in six months who overheard the remark said, "Dig it man, that's exactly what I'm

going to do."

"There would be general panic if they got into the box," said another enlisted man who makes tapes of Vietnamese radio transmissions. "It's not even sure they could get guns to the men in time to ward off an attack. And even if they did we wouldn't know what to do. Anyway, I'm a pacifist. I'd dodge but I wouldn't shoot back. I'd let them kill me. It would be inevitable anyway if they got into the box."

"I'm a conscientious objector," said one teletype repairman who plans to emigrate to Canada as soon as he gets out of service. "I just can't stand violence. If I got caught on base I'd try to hide somewhere. If I were in my bungalow I'd just sit and watch it. I'd definitely feel a lot safer."

A distaste for the job and the military, and increasing psychological pressure, have also led to work stoppages and hints of sabotage by some of the soldiers.

"These guys enlisted as James Bond types," one soldier said. "It was built up to them that they were going to be spies, wear civilian clothes and all that. None really knew what he was getting into. They have romantic images of themselves and they got disillusioned."

The speaker was an Army medic who was the only person at Ramasun daring enough to talk publicly. What he said, however, was echoed in off-the-record conversations with more than a dozen other first-term GIs.

The attitude of many enlisted men here toward military life is reflected in two of the most common words in the Ramasun vocabulary: "beggar" (anyone who attempts to enforce orders), and "puke" (career soldier).

Enlisted men here claim that it is common practice to sabotage equipment to slow down or eliminate work. They also report that there have been two organized strikes here this year.

GI sources also claim that for three days in July one shift of Vietnamese linguists who monitor North Vietnamese radio broadcasts all showed up at the post dispensary as collectively "sick."

But real escape is drugs.

"Seventy per cent would be a safe figure for the number of guys at Ramasun who use marijuana," the medic estimated. A similar figure

was given by several other GIs.

Almost every enlisted man I talked to admitted at least sometimes going on duty while high on methedrine ("speeding").

Were it not for drugs there probably would be more problems at Ramasun. The Army seems to know this.

Although periodic urine samples are taken, the procedure is so inefficient that it rarely catches anyone except the occasional heroin addict.

The Army makes no apparent effort to stop the use of marijuana off base and gives only an Article 15 (non-judicial punishment) to

GIs caught with it on base.

"If they tried to do any more, like take a guy's security clearance away, they really would have a strike on their hands," predicted one enlisted man. "The whole box would walk out."

Behavior and emotional problems, according to one medic, are among the most common complaints at the dispensary.

In February, he said, one enlisted man came into the dispensary nervous, upset and complaining of buzzing in his head. The next day, he hanged himself with a lamp wire in a lavatory.

With the war creeping closer to Ramasun, and the growing possibility of a sap-

per attack, fear and suspicion may also be involved. It is speculated that American jets would bomb the "box" (where most enlisted men work in round-the-clock shifts) if there were any danger of the base being captured, regardless of how many enlisted men were still inside.

Is making war the problem? According to one enlisted man, it is: "You listen to this guy every day, get to know his voice and something about him, and then you find out where he is. You send in his coordinates (on a map). He gets blown away — or at least you never hear him again. That blows some guys' minds."