

CIA Base in Laos Is a Ghost Town Awaiting Attack

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VIENTIANE, Jan. 1—A badly demoralized army of Meo tribesmen waits at the CIA base of Long Cheng, 96 miles north of here, for Communist forces to make their next move.

Long Cheng is a virtual ghost town, after its 30,000 civilian residents fled following the loss of the Plain of Jars to Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese forces last month. Long Cheng is locked away deep in the mountains, most of which are now held by hostile forces poised to attack the base. Air America planes still come and go endlessly through the day, but the soldiers remain. They, too, want to leave.

U.S. source confirmed that the United States has no intention of supporting future attempts by Gen. Vang Pao to recapture the plain. There were also strong indications that the United States would write Long Cheng off if it falls before the rainy season, which begins in four months.

"The end to defending Laos is in sight," one U.S. source said.

Army Can't Hold

Lt. Nhuan, 25, a Lao officer who joined Gen. Vang Pao's army a year ago when he could find no decent work in Vientiane, said the Meo army would not hold if heavily hit by the enemy.

"We are afraid, very afraid now," he said.

Nhuan is a veteran of the Plain of Jars retreat, as well as its capture earlier this year by Vang Pao's forces.

In the past two years he has come to know the CIA-supported Meo army in the flush of success and in bitter, frightening defeat. He rambled on about the rush of artillery and soldiers that crushed the Laotians on the

30-square mile plain.

Nhuan did not look for scapegoats, just said they were overwhelmed. He did confirm what is being whispered in American circles in Vientiane, that Meo senior officers were celebrating the Meo new year at Long Cheng, away from their troops on the plain, when the attack came. Nhuan said he and other junior officers and sergeants were in command.

Nhuan also noted that money problems contributed to the low morale. Thai troops get three and four times as much money as Meo troops, and are paid directly by the Americans. Meo and Lao soldiers have not been paid by their Meo officers for two or three months, which Nhuan said produced bitter tensions.

But it was not just that, Nhuan said. He spoke in

awe of a tank rumbling to within 40 yards of his unit and pumping round after round into their position.

Walked Three Days

Nhuan said they left the plain Dec. 18, at least a day earlier than U.S. sources in Vientiane announced, walking three days to Ban Na, 15 miles north of Long Cheng.

After two weeks, Nhuan said he cannot remember

seeing a single dead North Vietnamese, but added that only 18 of about 500 Thai artillery and infantrymen on Fire Support Base King Kong overlooking his own position made it to Ban Na with them when they retreated.

"Now everyone is waiting to leave Long Cheng," Nhuan said.

North and east of the base, and already within the outer defense perimeter, North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao commanders are grouping men, materiel and artillery. It is just a matter of time, before they attack, informed sources said.

U.S. planners have not relinquished hope for Long Cheng, but they hastened to add the question: "How important is Long Cheng, anyway?"

"The mountains up there are big. There is lots of room to go and no sense in being tied to one location," a CIA planner said.

A qualified U.S. government source said: "Long Cheng can be held even at this point, so long as no one makes a big mistake when the crunch comes."

Temporary Move

Nhuan said he believed their next location would be at Ban Son, about 20 miles southeast of Long Cheng. He said the Americans took their equipment to Ban Son, but other sources said that was only a temporary emergency move.

Nhuan noted that following the retreat from the plain, Meo troops found that North Vietnamese-Pathet Lao commanders, had in what seemed almost like an afterthought, moved into small but critical positions both north and east of Long Cheng, pushing the Meo army closer to headquarters.

It was not an afterthought, but, as U.S. planners said, a coordinated effort to outflank the retreating Meo-Thai forces. The Communists also moved small commando units to within three miles of the base itself for harassment and reconnaissance.

The loss of two hills overlooking the base, has put defense of Long Cheng in a "grave" condition, military observers said.