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Deeper CIA Role in Laos Revealed

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The Central Intelligence Agency spent about \$70 million to operate an army of irregular forces numbering more than 30,000 men in Laos during Fiscal 1971, a Senate Foreign Relations Committee staff report disclosed yesterday.

The report portrayed a far broader picture of clandestine American involvement in the Lao guerrilla armies, now

known as the BGs (after the French bataillons guerriers), than has yet surfaced publicly in Washington.

The 23-page document, prepared by Committee staff members James G. Lowenstein and Richard M. Moose, was released yesterday by Stuart Symington (D-Mo.), chairman of the subcommittee on United States Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad.

There has been a wide-

spread conception, as a result of Symington subcommittee hearings and newspaper articles two years ago, that the principal CIA-trained guerrilla force in Laos was concentrated in the Plain of Jars under the leadership of Meo Gen. Vang Pao.

But the new report, based on interviews with American military and diplomatic officials in Laos, asserts that BG "irregular" forces are operating in all but one of the five military regions of Laos. Only

38 per cent of the irregulars are under Vang Pao's command in the second military region, which encompasses the Plain of Jars.

The BG irregulars, says the Senate report, are playing a far more important role in the Laotian war than the Royal Lao Army. They have taken heavier casualties and accounted for higher enemy kills than the regular Lao army forces.

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In the 1969 to early 1971 period, for example, the BGS reportedly suffered 8,020 killed, and accounted for 22,726 enemy deaths, according to official figures. The Royal Lao Army in the same period lost 3,664 and reported an enemy kill of 8,522.

"The most effective military force in Laos is not the Royal Lao Army, but the force known previously as the Armee Clandestine... and now as the BGS. The BGS units are part of the irregular forces which are trained, equipped, supported, advised, and to a great extent, organized by the CIA," the report asserts.

"The BG units have become the cutting edge of the Lao military forces, as one U.S. official puts it."

The irregular units, says the staff report, "do most of the day-to-day patrolling, ambushing and attacking throughout the country." They are "closely" supervised and fed and paid by the CIA. Unlike the Royal Lao Army, the Senate document says, the BGS are guaranteed evacuation by Air America helicopters (a CIA-organized airline) and medical care—in some cases provided in a U.S. field hospital at the Royal Thai Air Force base in Udorn, Thailand.

It took five weeks of negotiation with the Nixon administration to release the sanitized version of the report. The document is shot through with the word "deleted," which signifies omissions of facts and numbers insisted upon by exclusive agencies.

But the first time the CIA permitted itself to be referred

to by name in a published document of the Subcommittee during its three-year review of U.S. military commitments. Although specific CIA expenditures were stricken from the report, they could be simply computed by subtracting published figures listed for the Defense Department and AID from the overall totals given in the subcommittee report.

In a statement announcing release of the Laos report, Symington said he found it "an encouraging sign that the Executive Branch has finally agreed that much of what the United States government has been doing in Laos may now be made public."

"The veil of secrecy which has long kept this secret war in Laos officially hidden from the American people has been partially lifted," he added. He protested, however, the administration's continued refusal to declassify much of the information bearing on U.S. support of Thai military forces in Laos.

Members of the Foreign Relations Committee have taken the position that the Thai units which have been acknowledged by the administration to be fighting in Laos are in violation of the Fulbright Amendment to the 1971 defense authorization and procurement bills. It prohibits American financing of third country forces in Cambodia and Laos and was designed to prevent further escalation of the U.S. role in the Indochinese war.

Most references to Thai troops in Laos were sanitized from the staff report, Foreign Relations Committee sources, however, indicated that the United States may have spent

as much as \$35 million to finance a Thai "irregular" military presence in Laos.

The administration has refused to disclose how much it is spending for how many Thai troops in the Laotian war. Symington and other Foreign Relations Committee members, however, have cited publicly a figure of 4,800 Thai irregulars in Laos. This would indicate an approximate spending level of roughly \$7000 per Thai per year. A State Department spokesman said last week that there are fewer than 4,000 Thai "volunteers" in Laos.

"The Thai irregular program developed during the past year and was designed by the CIA specifically along the lines of the irregular program in Laos," the report said. "The CIA supervises and pays for the training of these irregulars in Thailand and provides their salary, allowances (including death benefits), and operational costs in Laos."

In objecting to the administration's secrecy policy on the Thai irregulars, Symington said, "The stated reason for this Executive Branch refusal to declassify these facts is so as to avoid making public what the governments of Thailand and Laos do not wish to make public. But since the taxpayers of this country are paying the bills, why should the recipient foreign governments have the right to dictate what our citizens can and cannot be told about the way in which public funds are being spent?"

That forces were introduced into Laos in significant numbers early last year when North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao forces swept across the Plain of Jars and nearly captured the strategic CIA com-

mand posts of Long Cheng and Sam Thong.

"At the time of our visit to Long Cheng on April 28," said the Lowenstein-Moose report, "there were (deleted) Thai- there, at the nearby base of Sam Thong, and at Hill 1663 near Sam Thong. (There was also a small Thai team of (deleted) men at Nam Yu in Military Region I.)"

"We were told that the details of the funding were not known in Vietnam, as all of this bookkeeping is done in Washington," the staff report said. "The administration contends that the Thai forces are volunteers, recruited in their homelands."

The staff report takes a grim view of the military prospects ahead for the Royal Lao-Sovanna Phouma. It notes that since the Laotian "incursions" by South Vietnamese forces last spring, "more Lao territory has come under enemy control and there are about three regiments more of North Vietnamese forces in southern Laos than there were before the Lam Son operation."

Despite the reported claims of destruction of North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao supply trucks — 12,368 damaged and destroyed in 1970 — the report says "these figures are not taken seriously by most U.S. officials, even Air Force officials."

The report also listed—for the first time with tacit official acknowledgement—the number of U.S. Air Force sorties over Laos. Monthly sorties by the Seventh Air Force in January 1970 reached a high point of 14,000. The breakdown of air missions between northern Laos and the southern pannerhandle was deleted by

administration officials, however. The number of American raids declined to 8,209 in April 1971, the report said. Lowenstein and Moose touched off the disclosure during their April 22-to-May 4 trip that B-52s have been used regularly in Northern Laos since February 1970. The administration, however, declined to give the Senate investigators the B-52 sortie rate.

In assessing the future prospects of the war, the two investigators said, "Most observers in Laos say that from the military point of view the situation there is growing steadily worse and the initiative seems to be in the hands of the enemy..."