

Meo Troops Battle for Ridge

By Jack Foisie
Los Angeles Times

LONG CHENG, Laos, Jan. 19—Maj. Chanh had just recounted his losses—28 killed and 69 wounded. Then an enemy mortar burst into his position and he became the seventieth.

That is the way it was Wednesday on "Skyline Ridge," an escarpment rising sharply 2,000 feet out of Long Cheng Valley which has been a battleground for the past week in one of the most vicious fights of the Laos war.

The North Vietnamese seized the ridge a week ago, and since then the troops of Meo Gen. Vang Pao have been battling to get it back. He is assisted by American advisers, calling in waves of bombers.

Much of Long Cheng base in the valley has been evacuated as the enemy continues to pound it with long-range artillery. The airstrip—for a decade the most important in northern Laos—cannot be used until the enemy is driven off Skyline Ridge. "So he won't be looking down our throat," the talkative Vang Pao explained.

An air of confidence is returning at Vang Pao's headquarters. More than half of the four-mile-long ridge is back in the hands of progovernment troops.

[A Laotian government spokesman said in Vientiane that Laotian government troops had recaptured all of Skyline Ridge, UPI reported. Gen. Thongphan Knocksy, spokesman for the Defense Ministry, said the government troops were sweeping the eastern crest of the ridge, which was captured Tuesday, to dislodge the remaining North Vietnamese forces from bunkers and trenches.]

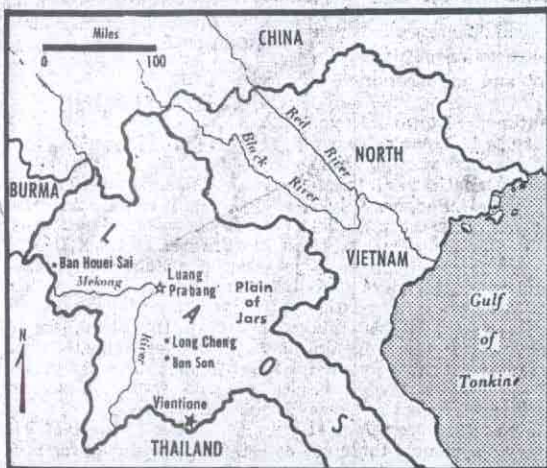
Supplies Dropped

In Long Cheng valley itself, four miles long and a mile wide, there is some activity again. American choppers swooped down to the valley floor to drop off Laotian soldiers for a hut-by-hut wipeout of enemy snipers. Large American transport planes circled overhead to drop supplies.

The bright sunshine bounces off the tin roofs of a thousand huts—now abandoned—where the families of Lao fighters once lived.

As we fly into the valley for a brief and gingerly look, we can see evidence of hasty evacuation of the base. Bombs and napalm pods have been left behind. The wood-and-stone houses of CIA personnel have been looted. The wreckage of a plane leaves an ugly scar.

Standing serene and unmolested on a small knoll in the valley is a Buddhist tem-



January 20, 1972

—The Washington Post

Reporters made their first visit to the CIA base at Long Cheng yesterday, but many of the forces had withdrawn to Ban Son. A source in Vientiane, Laos' capital, said a base at Nam Yu, near Ban Houei Sai, had become a new center of intelligence activities.

Overlooking Long Cheng

The Washington Post

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ple, its fading paint still able to glow when struck by the sun.

But the big fight is on Skyline Ridge. Our air America helicopter spirals out of the valley and hurriedly drops us on "Charlie Whiskey," the high point in the center of the ridge.

'Group Mobile 30'

Maj. Chanh commands "Group Mobile 30," with about 700 men strung out for more than a mile in holes dug by hand or formed out of craters.

Until 12 days ago Chanh had his troops in an easy job near Vientiane, the country's administrative capital 80 miles to the south of Long Cheng.

That Chanh's unit could be transferred to the embattled Long Cheng ridgeline indicates improvement in Laotian unity as well as the importance attached to this northern stronghold just below the Plain of Jars. In past years, regional commanders refused to turn over their troops to help Vang Pao. Laotian elite despise him because he is a

Meo tribesman and a former French Army sergeant.

Chanh, a paratrooper, is too busy to spell his long last name. He moves among his men, cheering them up. His troops took "Charlie Whiskey" with the losses Chanh describes. He points out where the enemy is dug in on the next ridge. He looks concerned about his visitors.

"They mortar us about every 10 minutes," he explained. "That is why we are so well dug in."

Boy Wounded

Sure enough, without a whirl of warning, there is a smash close by. A boy-soldier (we learned later he is 14) is splashed with shrapnel. The boy wraps a shred of parachute silk around his head and then plods off to see the aid man.

There is another smash. This time it is Maj. Chanh who suffers a minor head-wound from Shrapnel. Lao soldiers do not wear steel helmets.

Vang Pao has about 3000 men for the immediate de-

fense of Long Cheng. It is believed that the North Vietnamese outnumber him about two to one. The Hanoi-directed troops are still pressing forward, but with less gusto in the past several days. B-52 and other American and Lao bombers have hurt them.

4 U.S. Planes Said Hit by Chinese Fire

VIENTIANE, Jan. 19 (AP)—Chinese antiaircraft guns are believed to have hit four U.S. planes searching for three Americans missing in northwestern Laos, an Air America spokesman said today.

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 C-123 transport plane vanished Dec. 27.

The Chinese are building a road in the northwest—in an area held by the pro-Communist Pathet Lao—and heavily defend it.

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

Poll Shows Crimes Frighten Britons

LONDON, Jan. 19 (AP)—The people of Britain, faced with a surge in violent crime, are frightened in their own homes and terrified when their children are out alone at night, a newspaper poll showed today. They blame lenient judges more than the police.

The Sun, a tabloid, said a questionnaire answered by thousands of its readers showed that three out of four did not feel secure at home, are frightened to walk alone at night and are scared to death if they see a crowd of youths approaching. Ninety per cent worried when their children went out at night.