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## U.S. ROLE IN LAOS DETAILED IN STUDY

Airmen Aided Fighting in  
1966, Testimony Shows

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, April 19 —

The United States, it was disclosed today, secretly stationed air observers in northern Laos in 1966 to help guide the bombing of Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese forces by Royal Laotian and American planes.

The secret Air Force operation, known as Project 404, was described in testimony on the American involvement in Laos made public today by a foreign relations subcommittee headed by Senator Stuart Symington, Democrat of Missouri.

The testimony by State and Defense Department officials represented the first official acknowledgement that Americans stationed in Laos had been at least indirectly engaged in the ground war that has been going on for years in northern Laos. The conflict has been between the Royal Laotian Government, supported by the United States, and the Communist-led Pathet Lao faction, supported by North Vietnamese troops.

### 100 Americans Killed

It was also brought out in the testimony that since 1962 about 100 American civilian and military personnel had been reported killed in Laos. Of these casualties, about half were stationed in Laos. The remainder were Air Force pilots operating out of bases in Thailand.

This estimate was somewhat higher than the casualty figures in Laos supplied by the White House in March. In a policy statement on Laos issued on March 6, President Nixon asserted that "no American stationed in Laos has ever been killed in ground combat operations." The White House subsequently acknowledged that an Army captain and 26 civilians had been killed or listed as missing as a result of enemy action over the last six years.

One possible explanation for the discrepancy was that the White House was not including in its estimates the Air Force's air controllers who had been shot down over Laos.

As the debate over American military involvement in Laos has built up in recent months, the Administration has conveyed the impression that no Americans stationed in Laos have been directly involved in the fighting. The most that the Administration has acknowledged is that American planes stationed in Thailand and South Vietnam have been providing combat support for Royal Laotian troops.

Until the publication of the testimony, there had been no indication from the Administration that an Air Force team stationed in Laos had been assigned the mission of reconnaissance and air spotting for Royal Laotian and United States Air Force planes in the bombing of enemy targets.

According to the testimony, the air controllers were introduced into Laos late in 1966 as a result of an action initiated by the American mission in Laos and not at the specific request of the Royal Laotian Government, headed by Premier Souvanna Phouma. Initially, 117 militarymen and five civilians were sent in, but the number has now been reduced to 106.

Flying in small aircraft and accompanied by Laotian observers, the Air Force controllers assist in finding targets and directing Royal Laotian and Air Force planes to strike them.

As described in the testimony, Project 404 is part of a large bombing operation directed by the U. S. Ambassador to Laos.

William H. Sullivan, former Ambassador to Laos and now Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, outlined to the subcommittee how the United States Ambassador in Vientiane approved or disapproved bombing targets recommended either by the Government or by the United States Air Force. This prompted Senator Symington to observe at one point in the hearing that the Ambassador had become virtually "a military pro-consul."

The testimony, taken last October, was made public after six months of controversy between the subcommittee and the Administration over the secrecy surrounding the American military involvement in Laos.

Initially, the Administration had refused to make much of the testimony public. Its basic argument was that no information could be made public if it indicated, directly or indirectly, that the United States had violated in any way the provisions of the 1962 Geneva accords establishing the neutrality of Laos.

Under the pressure of Senate protests, the Administration gradually relented. Following the President's statement in March, substantial portions of the testimony were made public.

As finally approved by the State Department, the 234 pages of censored testimony provided a detailed picture of a military involvement that has already been described in general terms by the Administration. Because of the censorship, the published testimony in many cases is not as explicit as reports that have appeared in the American and foreign press.