

CIA's Spy Teams Inside Red China

Tribesmen On Roving Patrols

By Michael Morrow
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Houei Sai, Laos

This sleepy Mekong river town is as close as a journalist with any regard for his safety can get to a secret CIA outpost which is the staging area for armed reconnaissance teams being inserted by the United States into China.

Sources close to the CIA pinpoint the staging area at a small mountain valley airstrip called Nam Lieu (Nam Yu) 15 minutes' flying time north of Houei Sai. According to the same highly reliable sources, "there is always a team in China."

The teams are equipped with American small arms, a special three-pound radio with a range of 400 miles, and other special gear. Their missions are to tap Chinese telegraph lines, watch roads and do other types of intelligence gathering. Teams have gone as far as 200 miles into China.

Each team is said to consist of about 15 men, most of whom are Yao hill tribesmen. Yao are used because

this tribe lives in large numbers along the mountainous frontiers of Laos, Burma, Thailand and China. There are approximately 2 million Yao living inside China, and some of the guerrillas have family connections there. Meo and Lao Theung tribesmen are also used for similar reasons.

The teams are normally flown to a sod airstrip known as "Site 93" or "Moung Moune" about 20 kilometers north of Nam Lieu, near the Mekong river where it forms a border with Burma.

Sometimes they are put down right on the banks of Mekong by helicopters. They carry instantly inflatable rubber rafts to use crossing

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the Mekong into Burma. From Burma they continue northwest, entering China about 50 kilometers from Site 93.

The teams from Nam Lieu are gone three to four months, maintaining contact by radio with Nam Lieu and with airplanes which fly close to the China border in order to pick up their broadcasts.

On at least one occasion an airplane has been almost shot down for straying into China. During July 1968, an Air America "porter" single-engine plane with two aboard crossed the Chinese frontier near the tri-borders of Burma, Laos and China. Parts of both wings were blown away by anti-aircraft fire but the plane was able to limp back to base.

Several of the teams inserted into China have been

captured, and some have switched allegiances, returning to Nam Lieu as counter-spies.

CHINESE

There has been at least one occasion when a returning team brought Chinese back with it. During 1968, five local Chinese functionaries caught up in the purges of the Cultural Revolution in China defected to a Nam Lieu reconnaissance team.

They were brought to Nam Lieu by the team. There they were well treated by the Americans for a time but

eventually turned over to the Royal Laotian Government.

According to sources close to the CIA the five were thrown into the Laotian equivalent of a "tiger's cage," a 12 by 12 by-12 foot pit exposed to the elements and without sanitation facilities, and eventually executed.

DIRECTED

Like most CIA operations in Laos, the one at Nam Lieu is directed from a super-secret headquarters at Udorn airbase in Northeast Thailand. There are four Americans at Nam Lieu, however, headed by a rough-and-tumble veteran clandestine guerrilla organizer named Anthony Poe.

In addition to activities inside China, Poe and his team also work with hill tribesmen in the area, organizing, training, equipping and resupplying them. There is also a joint operation between the "SGU" (special guerrilla units) and Thai Army which they direct at Xieng Lom south of Houei Sai on the Lao-Thai border.

Poe is a legendary figure in Laos, known best for his dislike of journalists, disregard for orders and radio codes, capacity for Lao whiskey and expertise at clandestine guerrilla operations.

He is an ex-Marine non-commissioned officer, wounded in landing at Iwo Jima, who remained in Asia after World War II. In the '50s he

helped organize Tibetan CIA-aided insurgents, escorted them to Colorado for training and finally went back with them into Tibet.

Later he worked in the Thai-Cambodian border area with the "Khmer Blue" anti-Sihanouk guerrillas receiving

assistance from the CIA, and in other parts of Thailand with other guerrilla groups for a total of five years.

He has been in and out of Laos since before the Geneva Accords of 1962, and was one of the first Americans involved in arming and train-

ing hill tribes paramilitary groups in Laos.

He refuses to have his picture taken, and once literally threw a journalist's camera away for taking a picture of him. He has refused to obey higher orders commanding him to commit his paramili-

tary guerrillas to large-scale attacks away from their home area, and often disregards radio procedures.

Those who know him say his drinking stems from the dangerous life he leads, particularly the flying he does through the treacherous

mountains of northern Laos.

Poe is highly respected by some but hated by others involved in secret operations in Laos for his brusque and stubborn manner. He is said to prefer working with the hill tribes to working with Americans and looks down on most American operations because of their heavy reliance on American personnel.

Poe is said not to have been back to the U.S. in 15 years. He is perhaps the only American legally married to a woman of the hill tribes (though many keep mistresses). He has a home at Udorn Airbase in Thailand.

There are reasons to believe Poe's operation at Nam Lieu is just the tip of an iceberg of U.S. activities in China and Burma. Take for example:

- Sources close to the CIA report that the CIA is working with Shan insurgent groups in northern Burma. According to the same sources, the Burmese government is getting assistance from the CIA mounting air

strikes on insurgent groups in the same area. This second operation is centered at Mandalay.

- Burmese border officials at the Thai-Burma border northwest of here claim there is permanent CIA "intelligence gathering activity" going on in Burma near the Chinese and Lao borders.

"White Chinese" guerrillas remnants of Chiang Kai-

shek's army forced out of China by the Communists) numbering 2000 men and armed with M-1, M-2, and M-16 American rifles are also said by the Burmese to be active in the same area (Chinese Communist troops are also reported by the Burmese to be in the area).

- Nung people originally from the mountains of the North Vietnamese and Chinese borders now living north of Saigon, near the provincial town of Xuan Loc in South Vietnam, report some of their men have been recruited at high salaries to work in guerrilla bands on the North Vietnamese and Chinese frontiers.

The Nungs are given 500,000 piasters (about U.S. \$1500 at the free market rate of exchange) before they leave, and another 500,000 if and when they come back six months later.

As for Houei Sai, it knows much more than it lets on. Long a center of the opium trade, it has learned to hear no evil, see no evil and speak no evil.

Everyone from the bearded IVS (International Voluntary Services) volunteer and the USAID refugee officer to the village restaurateur are part of the "team." Nobody here talks about Nam Lieu. Expressions of fear indicate the name of Poe is taboo. It is not hard to understand why.

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These are villagers in Houei Sai, the jumping-off point for U.S. clandestine activity in Red China