

## 'They Took Little Boys'

# Veterans of Vientiane

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### Vientiane

Two teen-agers go from house to house through the blistering heat of a dry season afternoon. Beyond the macadam the crutches of the elder, 16, kick out little clouds of dust that hang in the breathless air.

They're still in uniform; the right leg of the elder's fatigue pants flops as he clumps along to the next store front. The younger, 14, his man's fatigues sagging and bunching on the small frame inhabiting them, shuffles a stiff, lop-sided limp beside his friend.

They pause before the store front house to watch the eyes of those within; their hands make no move. They wait until someone inside hands them ten kip, or two cents. Then they move on, to the next, and the next.

Kham. Tha. the younger, picks at the canvas and rubber boots floating too large on his feet as he talks. He



Young Meo boys know the glory of battle—and its consequences

giggles often and his eyes seldom leave those of the fant — the foreigner. He's Lao; curious, open, gregarious, friendly. Eha, his older friend, is silent and unsmiling. He's also Lao.

"Yes, we're soldiers," Kham Tha answers, giggles, still plucks at his boots.

"We're finished with the army now," and he motions slightly to their geet, giggles again and looks at his friend to say something aside about he farang. Eha tells the little one to ask for moeny.

"Yes, we were wounded in the fighting," and "yes, we were soldiers for Vang Pao. We were wounded so they brought us to Vientiane for our wounds. They cut off Eha's foot at Sam Thong after he was wounded. They didn't cut mine off though, but it's not very good any more. A big piece of steel hit it, right through the boot, but not the same boots I have now."

"Eha was in the army for three years before his wound, but I was only there six months."

"Training?" He's puzzled, then brightens. "Oh, yes, one of the older soldiers showed me how to use a gun. It was a carbine," but later, he says with pride, "I had an M-16 rifle when another soldier was killed," and he makes a rifle of his hands, sweeps the horizon while making a staccato sound with his tongue, giggling.

"I want to go back to the army, but not the shooting. They don't want us anymore," and again he motions toward their feet.

"There are many soldiers like me. A lot of them are even younger. Eha is 16, but he was a leader already until they cut off his foot. He wants to go back with our friends too."

"No," they don't know what they're going to do now. Maybe later they'll go toward the mountains, or maybe just to Luang Prabang. "My mother and little brothers and sisters are at Luang Prabang now, I think. Eha doesn't know where his family is, so maybe I'll take him with me. First we have to get some money for the bus and to eat. In Luang Prabang I'll have my family. They'll help me."

"Thank you for the money," he says, giggles and shuffles across the street at

In Laos there are usually two kinds of records — those not kept and those classified as secret. Sources in the American Embassy say there are no records on the age of soldiers in the CIA's Meo army. But no estimate of the percentage of them under 16 years of age is less than ten per cent. Most sources put the figure around 50 per cent.

"You have to understand too," an American says, "that the CIA army isn't a Meo army any more, though Vang Pao is still their general and he's a Meo. Only 5 or

10 per cent are Meo. Now they're using anyone they can get their hands on. There aren't any Meo left."

Ethnic Laotians from the Plain of Jars say they were a source of soldiers until brought south early this year.

"Vang Pao's soldiers came to our villages and took the young men and boys away. Most young men had already gone to the Pathet Lao, or were hiding," an elder says, "so they took mostly little boys."

"Later we found some of

the boys at Long Long Cheng before we came here. My son is one of them," he says, indicating the husky, smiling 14-year-old boy behind him.

Another of the elders lifts the boy's sleeve to show the scar. It's ragged and pushes a high ridge from below the elbow to his shoulder. The boy keeps smiling.

"He's not good for anything now," the elder says of the arm. "He can't use the arm because it won't bend. He can't plow or plant, or anything else. He's useless, but he's my son."

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