

Then, There's SOG

No U.S. Troops In Laos Invasion

By George McArthur
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Saigon

By almost all the evidence, the U. S. military machine is abiding by President Nixon's pledge not to employ American ground troops in support of the current South Vietnamese drive into Laos.

There may have been some bobbles — though even this is denied by the headquarters of General Creighton Abrams — but the policy has been made clear to the buck privates and generals alike.

As is usually the case on the Indochina peninsula, there are several wars proceeding simultaneously in Laos and, in varying degrees, Americans are involved in all of them.

White House spokesman Hebert Klain recently said that up to 600 American soldiers are involved as advisers in Laos. The figure fails to take into account a good many Americans, civilian and military, who are embedded in the Laotian woodwork.

AMBASSADOR

All of these people are under the command of the U.S. Ambassador in Vientiane, G. McMurtrie Godley, whose daily activities resemble more those of a general than a civilian envoy. He reports directly to Washington, bypassing General Abrams in Saigon.

While the claim has sometimes been put forth that Godley's warriors are not "ground combat troops" it would be difficult to convince some of them.

Troops involved in such enterprises are not included in White House statements concerning the South Vietnamese drive into the Laotian panhandle.

That area, until recently, was a sort of no-man's land so far as the Americans were concerned. The CIA conducted some operations there under Godley's nominal direction. Air strikes were cleared by Saigon, Pacific headquarters in Hawaii and sometime Washington. The area was not

within General Abrams' tactical jurisdiction (although Cambodia now is).

However, there was a sometimes varying strip of land in Laos along the border which was marked on Abrams' battle maps under the code name "Tiger Hound."

This area was within the tactical scope of Abrams' responsibilities.

Incursions into this area were forbidden to regular American ground units, but no such restrictions applied to the American outfit known as SOG (Studies and Observation Group).

This outfit is openly listed on headquarters phone books (commanded by Army Colonel J. S. Sadler) and its headquarters in Saigon is plainly marked (parking reserved for SOG). Behind this facade, SOG has long conducted clandestine operations in Laos and is still doing so.

At one time it numbered some 2000 Americans and a large number of South Vietnamese.

PATROLS

While its operations are far ranging and certainly many are not known at all, SOG largely conducts long-range penetrations into enemy territory (including North Vietnam at one time). Sometimes the patrols are all Vietnamese and sometimes they include Americans.

Some intelligence people insist that SOG personnel could not be classified as "ground combat troops."

Their mission is to get intelligence and avoid fighting through they also sometimes get sabotage and similar assignments.

And while no one will confirm it, it is almost a certainty that SOG patrols helped prepared for the South Vietnamese invasion of Laos.

There are, of course, many other Americans involved in the invasion and the wording of White House statements places few restrictions on these men, in the view of the Saigon command.