

Controversial Job

The Army's Man In Phnom Penh

Phnom Penh

The most controversial element of the American involvement in embattled Cambodia is a group of 50 rugged gents who look like soldiers but wear civilian clothes.

They are soldiers, members of what is called the Military Equipment Delivery Team (MEDT). Their leader is Brigadier General, Theodore C. Mataxis, who was known in Vietnam for his gregariousness but now has become tight-lipped around most correspondents.

Mataxis has the job of dispensing some \$200 million worth of American military equipment this year to a Cambodian government army which is said to number, at least for bookkeeping purposes, 220,000 men.

Mataxis and his team see that the guns and bullets get down to the troops, that artillery is put into the hands of properly trained artillerymen, that bridging is available when the enemy blows up a bridge, and that there are enough spare parts and mechanics to keep the Cambodian Army rolling in trucks and jeeps or flying in helicopters (only eight so far in the fledgling Air Force) and transport planes.

"It's not an easy job," the 54-year-old General said, wiping the dampness of the humid afternoon off his bald head. "Yet it's a job required by Congress under its military-aid program legislation—to see that defense materials provided an ally or friendly government are effectively used."

That is why Mataxis, from Seattle, is irritated and puzzled at the recent spate of reports asserting he is an empire-builder who wants to deepen direct American military involvement in Cambodia. He also denies that he is at odds with Ambassador Emory Swank, who as the ranking American diplomat here has the final say on military matters as well.

Members of MEDT do go into the field to see Cambodian units but, said the General, they don't stay with units engaged with North Vietnamese or local insurgents. MEDT personnel usually get back to the relative safety of provincial towns by nightfall.

"So far our casualties have been one killed and five wounded, all in terrorist bomb attacks right here in Phnom Penh," Mataxis de-

clared. The first MEDT members entered Cambodia about ten months ago.

To cope with big city infiltrators, Mataxis is dispersing his Phnom Penh-based team, getting the enlisted men out of a downtown hotel, and regretfully canceling further public activities where Americans cluster and present tempting targets. The most recent terrorist attack was against Americans playing a baseball game in this capital city. As it has been in Saigon for years, all organized American sports are now forbidden here.

Mataxis ruefully acknowledges that he is regarded as a prime target for assassins. The Cambodian Army driver and military policemen assigned as his bodyguard vary the route as he is driven each day between home and office. Ambassador Swank had a satchel charge tossed at his car as he was driving to work several months ago, but it failed to explode.

The younger members of the Mataxis staff would occasionally like to partake of the limited social life of Phnom Penh but they are asked not to do so. A bedcheck is not required. The efficient Cambodian secret police have a written report available each morning on the previous night's wanderings of official and unofficial Americans.

With curbs on nocturnal relaxation, members of MEDT spend rather placid evenings in their houses scattered through the city.

By some standards, their living might be considered luxurious. "There seems to be no modest houses — only places like this one, or hovels," Mataxis lightly complained. He and his top staff officers live in two adjoining houses within a Cambodian-guarded compound. The food is American from the commissary in Saigon, an hour's flight away. It is prepared by Cambodian cooks in what they consider French style. The wine is mostly Californian.

While the menu and the living is predictable, members of MEDT are not. Computers helped to select the team. Mataxis himself is a man of many talents. He was a speechwriter for General Maxwell Taylor when Taylor headed the Army. He is the author of learned military articles. He knows India and its Army perhaps better than any other American.

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