

Laos: One Day the Air

By FRED BRANFMAN

WASHINGTON—In December, 1970, several dozen victims of the fullest automated war of our time were asked to record their memories in drawings. They were Laotian refugees from the devastated Plaine des Jarres in northeastern Laos who were at that time residing in camps around Vientiane.

Over 1,000 refugees had already been interviewed. Each one had reported that while ground fighting had been minimal, his village had been partially or totally destroyed by American bombing, that antipersonnel, napalm, white phosphorous and 500-pound bombs had caused numerous civilian casualties, and that he had spent much of his time huddling in caves, holes, tunnels or trenches. The artists were asked to describe their lives under the bombs from the

beginning in May, 1964, until September, 1969, when C.I.A.-directed Meo tribesmen took them from their villages.

For all that they have been through, however, these refugees are in some way rather fortunate. They are out from under. All indications are that tens—possibly hundreds—of thousands of peasants in Laos and Cambodia are living under similar conditions today.

While withdrawing ground troops, the current Administration had begun bombing Cambodia, doubled the bombing of Laos, where North Vietnamese soldiers are known to operate, and resumed the bombing of North Vietnam (twice a week since Jan. 1). About 2,700,000 tons of bombs have been dropped in the last two and a half years. more than struck Europe, the Pacific theater and Korea combined.

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planes Came

It is the first time in history that bombardment of populated areas has become the heart of military policy, with ground armies playing an essentially supplemental role: serving as a lure to get enemy soldiers out in the open for the bombers, as in the Laotian invasion; searching for supplies or refugees as in the Ashau Valley or on the Plaine des Jarres; defending major towns and bases.

True to George Orwell's prediction, a modern superstate is waging war by machine on its "vague frontiers whose whereabouts the average man can only guess at." At the current rate, 300,000 more tons will fall before the end of this year, with no end in sight.

Fred Branfman, an American writer, worked in Laos from 1967 to this year. He is the author of a book to be published soon, "Voices From the Plain of Jars."

Drawings and Captions by Laotian Refugees

Two years ago my life was 100,000 times difficult on account of the planes which went to bomb day and night like in this picture. We had to go dig holes in the side of the mountain and in the big forest so that we never saw the sunlight. And I myself one day at that time, I heard the sound of the planes and I ran into the hole. Just as I reached the mouth of the hole they they bombed. I was most afraid that I would die.

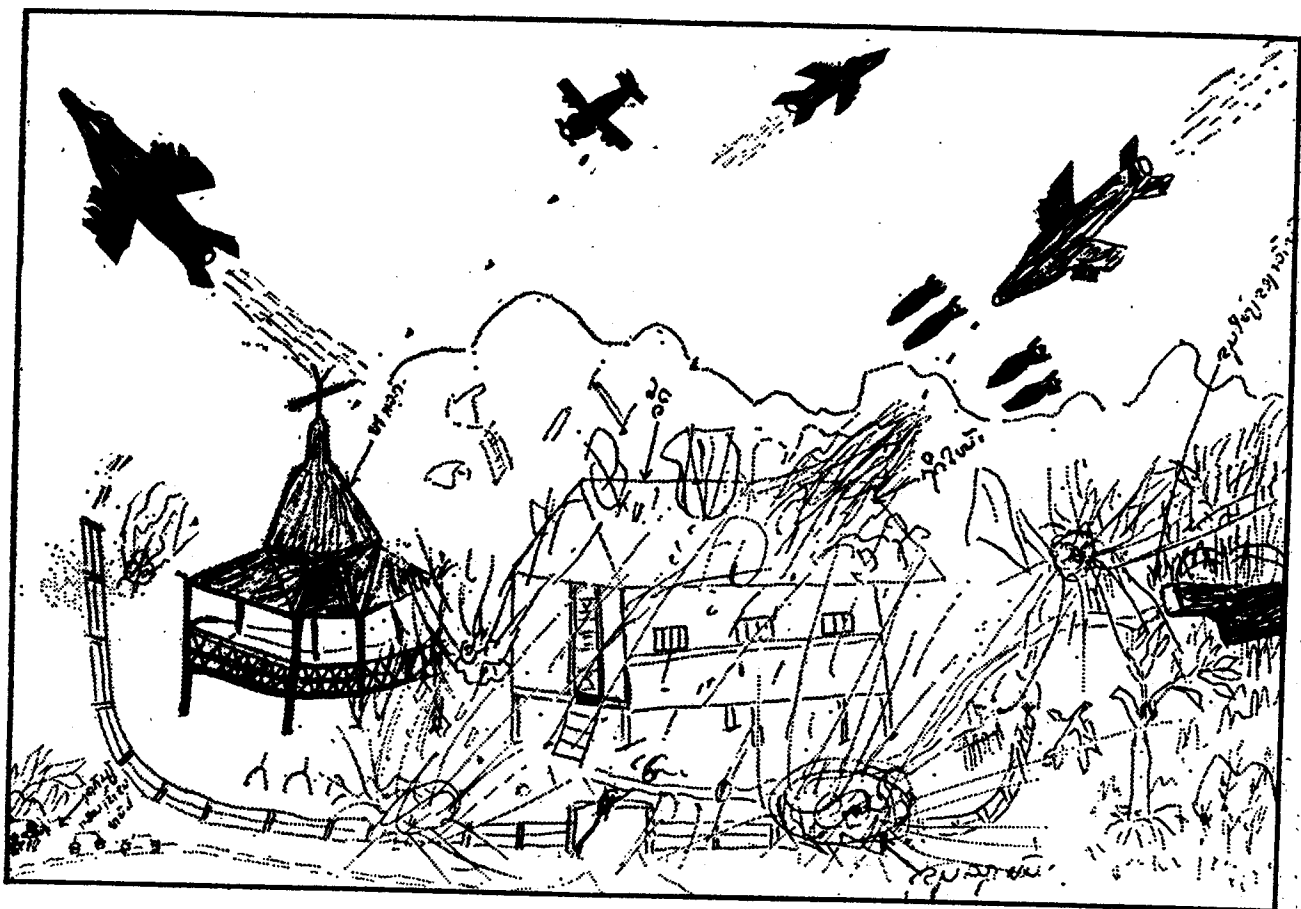
—Artist: a man, 26 years old.





There was an old woman who had one son only whom she loved most dearly. He never cried and her heart was always happy with her child at all times. But one day the airplanes came and gave her heart unhappiness. Because her son was struck by the airplanes and his leg was broken and his arm was hit. It made him cry, a cause for much pity. All children born into this world have hardship, but not like this.

—Artist: man, 19 years of age.



This picture shows the wat in my village. I am 69 years old and have always tried to live with a generous and good heart. I was a novice monk and then after I left the wat I still always tried to build and do good. This wat was started in 1916 and finished in 1930. In 1968, the fourth month, three jets came together dropping bombs. We gathered some things and ran for the holes. Just as we reached the holes the bombs exploded in the yard of the wat. At that time there were two children bringing food on a shoulder pole. They threw their things down and ran for the holes. They almost lost their lives. The planes shot up the place and saw the flames come up and then after an hour and a half left. And the monks tried to save some of the things from the wat but we couldn't because the flames were very strong already. We went to count the holes of the bombs and found that there were 28. The wat was lost completely and the part which was not burned was completely destroyed. Everyone in the village had great sorrow for the wat which we had cared for and honored for so many years. And after that we didn't know if we should build another. If we built again we were afraid that it would be bombed again.

—From a man who wrote about this truthfully.



One day in my village the planes came and bombed but they bombed in the mountains. They struck at the defenders of the air. There was shooting and then it was over and then a man parachuted down.

—A Villager

The life of the monks in the region of Xiengkhouang, a region of war. This truly I did see with my very own eyes, there was a monk wounded and much blood flowed out coloring his body red. One day he was in the wat, he had not yet gone into the holes. And there was airplane which came and bombed and this monk was hit. Then a villager, who thought of and worried about this old monk, his elder, came to pray over the old monk who had lost his life, saddening the hearts of the villagers.

—Artist: 22-year-old woman.

