

The war creeps up on a super secret U.S. base in Northeast Thailand

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RAMASUN, Northeast Thailand — DNSI — The modest and lax defenses of this secret intelligence gathering base are a source of worry to the U.S. soldiers stationed here. They also feel there is a danger of a world-wide security compromise should the base ever fall to the hands of attackers.

"Not very much I can tell you, not very much I dare tell you," said Army Specialist Percy Grant III, 20, of Friendship, Me., as he lounged in civilian clothes in front of a shoe store across the street from the entrance to the U.S. Army Security Agency base here.

The base is located on the highway that runs from the Laotian border to Bangkok just five and a half miles south of the American air base at Udorn. On base is a maze of wire and steel rods laid out over an area larger than a football field. Local people call it the elephant cage. It houses one of the most important intelligence gathering operations in the U.S. military is now conducting in the Indochina war.

An electronically tuned, all frequency, all directional antenna, the elephant cage picks up walkie-talkie conversations in North Vietnam or China as easily as a pocket transistor picks up local radio stations. It is the central listening post for American radio intelligence operations in mainland Southeast Asia and one of the most vulnerable American military installations in Thailand. Ramasun is bedlamin to

bomber pilots attacking North Vietnam with almost instant intelligence about the location and battle plans of airborne Mig fighters, as well as the position of the friendly aircraft.

Manned by an elite crew of Morse code interpreters, linguists, cryptanalysts and other intelligence specialists from the Army Security Agency and Air Force Security Service, Ramasun is one of the most important examples of secondary American military installations located in Thailand. It is a linchpin in the U.S. military's intelligence and communications networks in all Southeast Asia.

Despite its importance, Ramasun has long had only modest defenses: a cyclone fence patrolled by civilian Thai guards, and no bunkers. There were no practice alerts.

Most of the enlisted men and many of the officers lived off post, often in Thai-style wooden bungalows planted among the surrounding rice paddies. Although only about thirty-five miles from the Laos border and much less from hills infested by guerrillas of the Thai Patriotic Front flanking the Udorn area, Ramasun's security has not been a serious concern for its American occupants.

Security was almost totally in the hands of 125 civilian Thai guards, a regiment of Thai army located nearby the base five miles away and about 50 Thai border patrol police operating in the Udorn area.

In the last six months, however, things have begun to change. Prac-

bunkers, buildings, etc. with explosives.) Cement mortar pads have reportedly been discovered immediately south and east of the base.

The number of guerrillas in the area is estimated to range from 120 to 300. But some units that were formerly operating further south in the mountains of Dakorn Nakhorn province are known to have moved northward into the area around Ramasun and its neighboring U.S. military facilities. (In addition to Udorn air base there are Pepperginder bomb storage area about one mile south of Ramasun and newly opened Namphong air base, about 20 miles to the south.)

Ramasun's relatively small size plus its important mission make it a likely object of attack.

"If someone knocked out the elephant cage," said a member of the headquarters staff, "I would stop the air war; if the box (a long, white windowless building of concrete block in which top-secret operations are housed) fell it would compromise security worldwide."

Despite improved defense there's much skepticism about Ramasun's ability to weather a serious sapper raid. Army Security Agency regulations to the contrary, most army personnel (who outnumber Air Force People about 6 to 1) still live off base. At night the base is almost deserted except for men at essential jobs. The number of medics has recently been reduced from seven to two, and only one of these is on duty



Photo by Waldo Nilo

these guys gets shot at for the first time, he is going to shit in his pants and hit the ditch — and that's the last you're going to hear of him."

A young soldier due to get out of the Army in six months who overheard the remark said, "Dig it man, that's exactly what I'm going to do."

"There would be general panic if they got into the box," said another enlisted man who makes tapes of Vietnamese radio transmissions. "It's not even sure they could get guns to the men in time to ward off an attack. And even if they did we wouldn't know what to do. Anyway, I'm a pacifist. I'd dodge but I wouldn't shoot back. I'd let them kill me. It would be inevitable anyway if they got into the box."

"I'm a conscientious objector," said one teletype repairman who plans to emigrate to Canada as soon as he gets out of the service. "I just can't stand violence. If I got caught on base I'd try to hide somewhere. If I were in my bungalow I'd just sit and watch it. I'd definitely feel a lot safer."

The possibility of attacks on Ramasun and other American bases in Thailand raises questions about

Indochina war follow? A few Americans still remember the devastating November 1, 1964 attack on Bien Hoa air base near Saigon, and the bombing of an American officer's billet on Christmas eve of the same year, or the February 6, 1965 attack on a U.S. military advisor's compound at Pleiku. These were preludes to escalation of a war still being fought, still threatening to escalate.

Drugs are escape

The real escape at Ramasun is drugs, and in some instances, Thai mistresses. A personal distaste for the job and the military, and increasing psychological pressure, have also led to work stoppages and hints of sabotage by some of the 1200 American soldiers stationed at this isolated, and super secret intelligence base.

"These guys enlisted as James Bond types. It was built-up to them that they were going to be spies, wear civilian clothes and all that. None really knew what he was getting into. They have romantic images of themselves and they got disillusioned."

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"I can't see taking orders from a moron," said one enlisted man, "when all he's got on me is time in the army." Another said, "Look, there are only 208 guys in the Army qualified to do my job; I can pretty well do what I want."

Enlisted men here claim that it is common practice to sabotage equipment to slow down or eliminate work. They also report that there have been two organized strikes there this year.

During the North Vietnamese offensive in April, one shift of manual Morse operators (about 50 men) is said to have refused to listen to Morse transmissions for six hours. This was in protest against an order requiring them to keep a guard in their barracks because of vandalism. The enlisted men said that this knocked out American monitoring of such transmissions throughout Indochina. The strike occurred during a visit by Major General Charles Denholm, head of the Army Security Agency whose headquarters are at Arlington, Virginia. The general is said to have persuaded the men to return to work the next day, and no one was punished.

G.I. sources also claim that during July one shift of Vietnamese linguists who monitor North Vietnamese radio broadcasts all showed up at the post dispensary as collectively "sick." This routine went on for three days.

Despite regulations forbidding Army Security Agency (ASA) personnel living off base, many enlisted men at Ramasun (and some officers) retreat into the Thai style bungalows that dot the rice paddies across the road from the post.

The real escape at Ramasun is drugs. "Seventy percent would be a safe figure for the number of guys at Ramasun who use marijuana," Medic Cramer estimated. A similar figure was given by several other G.I.'s.

Marijuana is delivered to one's door for \$1.00 for a six ounce "brick."

Methedrine tablets (among other amphetamines and barbiturates, known as "horse," "mule," "elephant," and "lion," depending on their strength, can be bought for a nickel a tablet. Red rock heroin costs \$10 for three ounces, pure "snow" heroin about \$10 a small vial.

When this reporter was there in mid-August, cocaine hit town for the first time in several weeks, selling for \$6.00 for a pill bottle three-quarters full.

Almost every enlisted man this reporter talked to admitted to at least sometimes going on duty while "speeding" (high on methedrine).

"It helps you get through work," said one G.I. Off work, marijuana is smoked constantly and openly in the small wooden houses outside the base. The music of endless stereo tapes absorbs hour after hour of frustrated time.

Were it not for drugs there probably would be more problems at Ramasun. The Army seems to know this.

Although periodic urine samples (called the Golden Flow Program) are taken, the procedure is so inefficient that it rarely catches anyone except the occasional heroin addict.

Amphetamine and barbiturate users can fuzz an initial test by taking a legitimate sleeping pill or stay-awake pill beforehand. The test does not detect cocaine or marijuana.

The Army makes no apparent effort to stop the use of marijuana off base and only gives an Article 15 (formal written reprimand) to G.I.'s caught with it on base.

"If they tried to do any more, like take a guy's security clearance away, they really would have a strike on their hands," predicted one enlisted man. "The whole box would walk out." (The box is a windowless, concrete building at Ramasun which houses top secret operations.)

Drugs help keep a working relationship between the professional Army and the first term enlisted man. They also break it down on occasion. In July, for example, manual Morse translators put three tablets of almost pure methedrine into the workroom coffee pot. Two career sergeants, who were not drug users, were in-

capacitated and badly-frightened by the experience.

Medic Cramer recalled being threatened by an officer who claimed Cramer used drugs (though he couldn't prove it).

"You are a direct threat to my way of life. I'm going to do what I can to put you away," the officer told him.

Cramer claims he got an Article 15 for showing up at his job 15 minutes late for work one morning, and he accuses the officer of unwarranted harassment.

Other G.I.'s with similar problems talk openly of using methedrine to injure or even kill superiors bothering them.

"I'd just like to drop about three tabs into his coffee cup," said one enlisted man of an NCO he particularly dislikes; "it would fry his brain real good, be easier than fragging him (blowing up with a grenade) and more humane."

Behavior problems, according to Cramer, are one of the most common complaints at the dispensary.

A psychologist from Bangkok conducts a clinic once a month at the base. "When he is here he could be going 24 hours a day," said Cramer.

In February, one enlisted man came into the dispensary nervous, upset and complaining of buzzing in his head, Cramer said. The next day, he hung himself with a lamp wire in a lavatory.

Tension and fatigue are probably at the root of the nervous disorders at Ramasun. Morse code translators are sometimes required to listen to dot-dash transmissions for eight hours straight and 20 days in a row.

With the war creeping closer to Ramasun, and the growing possibility of a sapper attack, fear and suspicion may also be involved. There's speculation that American jets would bomb the "box" (where

most enlisted men work in round the clock shifts) if there were any danger of the base being captured, regardless of how many enlisted men were still inside.

Is making war the problem? According to one enlisted man, it is: "You listen to this guy everyday, get to know his voice and something about him, and then you find out where he is. You send in his coordinates (on a map). He gets blown away — or at least you never hear him again. That blows some guys' minds."

A more prevalent attitude is that "at Ramasun we just play war." When asked what do you think of the war, many say, "I don't think about the war anymore than I have to." Or, "I think the war is lost."

An American embassy spokesman in Bangkok said that "drug problems crop up from time to time at military installations and the military does have measures of coping with those, which include proper safeguards for the personnel involved. So far drugs have not been a problem with our men in Thailand."

The spokesman added that "it is not Army policy to condone use or possession of marijuana or any dangerous or habit forming drugs. Some action is always taken if a man is caught using or in possession of these materials."

"We feel it inconceivable that a commander would keep a man around who was on hard drugs He would either be sent for rehabilitation or put on trial. With marijuana, however, it is difficult for a commander to know when a man is using it unless someone tells — and people don't do that. Since most marijuana is smoked off work a man's efficiency is not likely to be impaired."