

# Pilots Recount Work of Secret Unit in Laos

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ST. LOUIS, Nov. 6—Teams of armed soldiers commanded by members of the U.S. Army Special Forces were operating regularly in Laos at least until the end of 1971, according to three former army helicopter pilots.

The three men, all discharged from military service, said that during a 16-month period beginning in September 1970, they were involved in transporting combat groups led by Americans into Laos and later recovering them.

The primary purpose of the missions was to gather intelligence about operations of the North Vietnamese army along the Ho Hi Minh Trail in eastern Laos, the pilots said. They said that Americans were involved in combat in Laos during the missions and that some were killed.

The missions occurred when American combat forces were officially said not to be operating in Laos. They also took place after the Special Forces had been withdrawn from duty in Vietnam, according to Pentagon announcements.

A Pentagon spokesman said that the department had no comment on the three pilots' stories. The spokesman said that Special Forces units were withdrawn from Vietnam in the summer of 1971, except for some individuals who served in a training and advisory capacity.

The three pilots interviewed were members of the 158th Assault Helicopter Battalion of the 101st Airborne Div., based at Camp Evans in South Vietnam. All said that their companies had been assigned at various times to participate in a top secret program named Command and Control North (CCN).

All American personnel involved in CCN, they said, were required to sign papers acknowledging that their operations were secret and that any disclosures could result in severe disciplinary action. For this reason, the three men insisted that their names not be used in any account of the CCN program.

Sen. Stuart W. Symington (D-Mo.) said that he was not surprised by the pilots' statements. "There have been various wars going on in Laos — most of them secret — for many years at a cost of the American taxpayer of billions of dollars. As time goes on, more and more details as to the conduct of these wars will become public knowledge."

The three pilots gave the following description of how CCN operated in Laos:

Groups of helicopters, they said, would take off from three bases in South Vietnam and carry reconnaissance teams to Laos. The bases were at Quangtri near the Demilitarized Zone, the Marble Mountain airstrip near Danang, and the Phubai air strip near Hue.

The teams included between 6 and 15 soldiers, most of them mercenaries from various countries including Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. Others were Montagnard tribesmen and Chinese, the pilots' said.

The teams were usually commanded by Americans. Most teams included from one to three Special Forces officers or noncoms, all of whom wore so-called sterile fatigues from which all labels and identification had been removed. Even an obviously American tattoo was sufficient to disqualify men from CCN missions, according to the pilots.

One of them described the operations as "a kind of Mission Impossible thing," in which Americans were told that if they were captured they would not be acknowledged by the United States. "They told us that if we got caught," he said, "nobody would help us."

On a regular basis throughout part of 1970 and all of 1971, the CCN teams made repeated drops in many parts of Southeast Asia. The missions

were often flown daily when weather conditions permitted, the pilots said.

Missions typically involved about 10 aircraft, including four unarmed Huey helicopters for carrying the combat teams, four Cobra helicopter gunships for protection and a fifth Huey which circled above the others as the command and control craft. There was also a propeller-driven airplane piloted by an Air Force officer working as forward air controller, pointing out landing places.

CCN missions were flown to contested areas in Laos and in South Vietnam, the pilots said. Landings were frequently made in both countries, they said.

They also reported that they had flown in North Vietnamese air space but had never landed there. They said that although they had been told of teams being dropped within North Vietnam, they had no personal experience of such landings.

They said, too, that CCN had two counterparts in other parts of South Vietnam. They were Control and Command Central (CCC) and Command and Control South (CCS). They reported hearing that CCC or CCS units sometimes delivered teams into Cambodia, but again disclaimed personal knowledge of operations within Cambodia.

The teams delivered into Laos were sometimes picked up after very short periods of time, depending on the purpose of their mission and whether they encountered enemy troops, the pilots said. The teams were concerned primarily with gathering intelligence and avoided combat whenever possible.

In some of the briefest missions, the helicopters landed near Laotian villages and circled nearby while the American-led teams attempted to take prisoners.

One pilot said that he often carried prisoners from Laos back to the bases in South Vietnam. They included men who appeared to be regular North Vietnamese soldiers, others who appeared to be civilians, and women.

He never saw or heard about the prisoners after taking them to South Vietnam, he said.

A fourth helicopter pilot said he was sometimes involved in so-called revenge missions, the primary purpose of which appeared to be the killing of North Vietnamese soldiers in areas where CCN teams dropped earlier had suffered serious losses.

"When a team was hurt badly, or wiped out, they'd decide to send out another mission," this pilot said. "We'd go for a briefing, and they'd say, 'we can't call it that officially, but this is going to be a revenge mission.'"

In most missions, a landing zone would be cleared by Cobra Helicopters using rockets and antipersonnel weapons. Most landings were in secluded places.

The reconnaissance teams were instructed to remain in Laos as long as possible while attempting to observe the operations of troops from North Vietnam, according to the pilots. Such missions sometimes lasted more than a week, while others were terminated hurriedly because the teams were discovered and threatened by enemy troops.

Recovering embattled teams was dangerous and at times impossible, they said. One reconnaissance team code-named "Alaska" was wiped out after being discovered according to the pilots. They also said they remembered several incidents in which American team members were lost, but they were unable to recall the names of the men.