

MAR 11 1972

Report 200 U.S. POWs In No. Laos

SF Examiner

VIENTIANE (Laos) — (AP) — Pathet Lao guerrillas told an Australian freelance photographer as many as 200 American prisoners are living in caves and tunnels in northern Laos.

John Everingham, who said he was just released by the Pathet Lao after 29 days in captivity, said he had several conversations with his captors about the fate of American pilots shot down and captured in Laos.

"They told me that in Samneua Province the entire population lives underground because of intense U.S. bombing," Everingham said.

He added that a Pathet Lao officer told him most people can come out to work in the fields when there are no planes around but the prisoners get only one hour of outdoor exercise a day.

"They told me there is a bakery in Samneua to make bread especially for American prisoners because they realize Americans are not used to a rice diet," the photographer said.

Everingham was captured

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17 miles southeast of the royal capital of Luan Prabang.

He said during the first few days of his captivity the Pathet Lao assumed he was an American pilot or spy and sternly lectured him about bombing. But he said he was fed well and not physically mistreated.

Asked how many American prisoners they hold, Pathet Lao troops gave answers ranging from 100 to 200, Everingham said.

The Pathet Lao, unlike the North Vietnamese, have never released a list of prisoners.

The U.S. Embassy in Vientiane lists 263 Americans missing in Laos.

"We have no idea where they are," U.S. consul Richard Rand said. "We think there is a good chance they have been moved to North Vietnam."

Everingham said the Pathet Lao told him all their prisoners are kept in Laos and are well cared for.