

# U.S.-Paid Thai Troops Blend With Laotian

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VIENTIANE LAOS, May 13—The disclosure in Washington last week that there are 15,000 to 20,000 American-sponsored Thai troops fighting in Laos came as no surprise in a part of the world notorious for porous national boundaries, private armies and clandestine warfare.

On Wednesday the former American Ambassador to Laos, G. McMurtrie Godley 3d, told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that 15,000 to 20,000 Thai irregulars were stationed in Laos, compared with 5,000 to 8,000 in previous estimates. Mr. Godley's testimony came during a hearing on his confirmation as Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs.

The sight of Thai irregulars in jungle fatigues, usually armed to the teeth, has been common in Laotian communities for the last three years, and since they are ethnically and linguistically similar to the Laotians with whom they mix, their presence is often taken for granted.

Although the United States Embassy and its large military attaché section here have carefully avoided anything more than an occasional guarded reference to the Thai troops over the years, American officials, until Mr. Godley's testimony, had indicated that there were about 6,000 Thai irregulars in Laos.

## Organized by C.I.A.

The Communist-led Pathet Lao and its North Vietnamese ally had always contended that the number was at least double this, and it now appears that their allegations tallied fairly well with reality.

The Thai "volunteers," in common with the indigenous members of the Laotian irregular forces, are recruited, paid, equipped, organized and led by the United States Central Intelligence Agency, whose paramilitary American employes, known as "case officers," often actually lead irregular units in combat.

Neither the Thai nor the Laotian Government ever takes public notice of the Thai troops in Laos because of the many diplomatic complications involved, but both Governments have been happy about the arrangement.

Bangkok has been gravely worried for years about the possibility of a Laotian or North Vietnamese Communist presence along the long Mekong River border, which is impossible to seal.

## Insurgents Vex Thailand

Thailand has growing problems with Communist insurgents of her own, made more serious by north eastern Thailand's large population of refugee Vietnamese, most of whom are sympathetic to Hanoi.

ers sometimes disburse only a portion of their unit payrolls, keeping enormous sums for themselves.

The United States concluded that Laotian units could be made more effective quickly only by imposing direct American controls on pay and supplies as well as leadership and that this could be done only in irregular units without seeming to impinge on Laotian national sovereignty.

Initially the system called for outfitting and organizing units of Laotian tribesmen, mainly Meos, the most important group of which was placed under the over-all command of the Meo tribal leader, Gen. Vang Pao.

But by the end of 1970 substantial numbers of irregulars were also being recruited by the C.I.A. in Thailand for service in Laos.

## Double the Pay of Regulars

Recruiting was easy since the Americans offered more than double the pay of a soldier in the regular Thai Army, as well as many fringe benefits, including survivor payments to widows and orphans, free medical care and freedom from the administrative corruption that helps impoverish most Southeast Asian soldiers.

The bases for recruiting, training and equipping not only the Thai volunteers but also many of the Laotian tribesmen remained in Thailand, fairly safe from public exposure.

One of the main Thai bases involved in these operations, Udon, has been opened to newsmen only for rare, escorted visits. Conveniently, Udon is in a part of Thailand—the north and east—inhabited mostly by ethnic Laotians rather than the slightly different Siamese of the south.

Irregulars in Laos are moved frequently and are thus very hard for outsiders to count or keep track of.

## Most in Southern Laos

The Thai irregulars over the years have been most noticeable in the larger river towns of southern Laos, such as Thakhek and Pakse. They have a widespread reputation for becoming easily involved in bar brawls and other violence, which too often has ended in automatic rifle fire and grenade detonations.

There is often resentment of Thai and Laotian irregular troops on the part of both the civilian population and regular army forces. The regular troops are envious of the irregulars, who are paid several times more than they are and who frequently throw their weight around.

Generally speaking, the irregulars — sometimes including boys only 11 or 12 years old — earn their pay. They are treated as shock troops and they have tended to take heavier casualties than regular units.

But regular army men are quick to point out that in the days just before and after the Laotian cease-fire on Feb. 22, Communist units quickly routed two battalions of supposedly crack Thai volunteers in the fighting near Paksong on the Bolovens Plateau.

Few Western military experts

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regard Thai troops, irregular or otherwise, as a match for North Vietnamese regulars. But the Thais have been useful in blunting attacks by local Laotian Communist units.

Last December, for example, when Pathet Lao units cut Route 13 between Vientiane and the royal capital of Luang Prabang, they threatened to take Muong Kassy and other key towns. Together with Laotian Government forces in the area, the Thais, who were rushed up from southern Laos, helped stop the drive.

Ambassador Godley's disclosure of the number of Thai volunteers in Laos may mean that the United States is considering ending or curtailing its support of the irregular troops soon. In fact, the Laotian cease-fire accord stipulates that all Thai and American troops must leave Laos within 60 days after formation of a coalition government, which does not appear imminent.

In any case the United States and its allies can continue to organize large irregular units or disband them without attracting much notice.

Most of the more than 180 airstrips around the part of Laos not controlled by the Communists are inaccessible to all but a few American and Laotian officials, and fairly large troop movements have often been carried out undetected—except, perhaps, by the Communist spies normally present during such operations.

There are now about 74,000 men in the regular Laotian forces in addition to more than 30,000 Laotian irregulars and the 15,000 to 20,000 Thai volunteers.

In February the Laotian irregulars were officially absorbed into the regular armed forces, theoretically meaning

an end to the presence of American case officers, inflated pay scales and elite status.

In fact, however, nothing appears to have changed, and there is general agreement that all the units involved would disappear—or worse, turn into gangs of bandits—without direct American backing.

On the enemy side, there are some 30,000 Pathet Lao soldiers, including a few thousand pro-Pathet Lao neutralists, plus perhaps 63,000 North Vietnamese, some 40,000 of whom are permanently engaged in the supply operation along the Ho Chi Minh trail through eastern Laos.

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Military cooperation between right-wing southern Laotian army leaders and Thai Army commanders, between some of whom there are close ties of blood or marriage, has become traditional over the years, and neither side sees anything exceptionable in the idea of Thais's fighting for the Laotian Government on American salaries.

The American decision to build up irregular forces in Laos resulted partly from the small size and general incompetence of the regular Laotian Army and partly from the major infusion, especially after 1969, of North Vietnamese advisers, supplies and combat troops into Laos.

Apart from the lack of effective officers, the Laotian regular forces are heavy with corruption, in which command-

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