

Catch-22 in the Indochina War

Washington

The Central Intelligence Agency pays combat flight bonuses to Laotian pilots not to fly combat missions. U.S. military aid pays the salaries of Cambodian soldiers who do not exist.

These are some of the Catch-22 style paradoxes of the American military role in Southeast Asia after the Paris accords and after the U.S. troop withdrawals.

BONUSES

They are cited in a Congressional staff study on Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam and Thailand in the aftermath of the peace treaty. The report was prepared for the Senate foreign relations subcommittee on U.S. com-

mitments abroad.

The matter of the CIA bonuses for the Laotian pilots is a new quirk of the war's twilight period. It results from the Laotian cease-fire agreement with its stricture against military air activity.

"We were told that the Lao Air Force wants to comply with the cease-fire but that the Military Region Commanders, especially in the south, continue to call for air strikes," report the authors of the study, Foreign Relations Committee staff investigators James G. Lowenstein and Richard M. Moose.

"In order to encourage the Air Force not to fly there-fore, the U.S. is making

monthly lump sum payments to pilots even if no combat missions are flown."

The phantom battalion problem in Cambodia goes back to the beginning of the large-scale American military assistance program there more than two years ago.

STUDIES

American military spokesmen in Phnom Penh at first minimized the matter. Later studies were conducted under U.S. auspices. One senior American military official issued cameras to Cambodian commanders in 1971 to verify the existence of their troops, whose salaries are paid out of U.S. military and economic aid. The cameras were never recovered and the issue never re-

solved.

U.S. estimates of the Khmer Republic fighting force vary in Washington and Phnom Penh, from 150,000 to 275,000, the report asserts.

The chief of the U.S. Military Equipment Delivery Team in Cambodia puts the effective strength at 275,700.

The Defense Attache's office put it at 261,518. The Joint Chiefs of Staff briefers in Washington put it between 175,000 and 190,000. State Department officials estimated the Cambodian fighting strength at 150,000.

CORRUPTION

Cambodia's minister of information told the Senate investigators that when the Cambodian military payroll has stood at 300,000 there

may have been as many as 100,000 "phantom" soldiers.

The underlying concern over the phantom battalions of the Khmer Republic is corruption. Generally the salaries of the phantom troops are pocketed by high-ranking Cambodian military officers, a fact that has been acknowledged both by U.S. and Cambodian authorities.

Whatever the size of the government army in Cambodia, the report says "all analysts agree" within the U.S. intelligence community that the number of North Vietnamese troops still in Cambodia is about 5000. The burden of the war against the government has been taken up by the Khmer Rouge (Cambodian Commu-

nist) movement.

From a paltry force of 2000 when the Indochina war spread to Cambodia in 1970 the Khmer Rouge force has grown to a present strength of about 50,000, according to U.S. intelligence estimates cited in the report.

Of Cambodia, the report says: "The Khmer insurgents are growing in strength and confidence and moving from success to success. The Phnom Penh government, although it has the arms, seems to have neither the resolve nor the skill to contain them. If they cannot, their own fate will be sealed and the balance in South Vietnam could be substantially affected."

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