

News of Laos Comes in Bits and Scraps

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The war in Laos is still an out-of-bounds, largely secret war.

With occasional exceptions, journalists are rigorously barred from seeing it.

They must depend for news of the war on whatever Laotian and American officials choose to tell them and on scraps of often inaccurate information picked up from irregular sources.

The restrictions imposed on access to and information about the war and many related matters are jointly enforced by the United States Embassy and the Laotian authorities. Each passes the responsibility to the other with alacrity when pressed about the situation.

The reason for the restrictions is that there are many things in the combat zones that United States and Laotian officials do not want reporters to see—what, for example, United

States individuals known to operate in advisory and liaison roles do at the fronts, what part bombing by American planes plays in support of Laotian forces and what there is to constant reports of special units from Thailand fighting with Laotian troops.

The nature of foreign participation on the Government's side in the war is clearly the most sensitive matter with United States and Laotian officials.

American spokesmen refuse to answer any questions in this sphere. Any formal query about how the Central Intelligence Agency is assisting Special Forces in Laos draws a quick "no comment."

Enforcing restrictions is simplicity itself. All transportation to war zones is officially controlled and journalists are kept away by being denied transportation.

Recent pleas by newsmen to be taken to the critical Sam Thong-Long Thieng combat

zone have been categorically rebuffed. It is possible for civilians, including journalists, to travel by commercial plane to the few cities in the Mekong valley still held by the government—Bon Houei, Sayaboury and Luang Prabang in the north, Savannakhet and Pakse in the south—and sometimes the fighting comes close enough to some of these centers to be seen.

Getting any further is just a fluke. But flukes have happened. An enterprising Japanese correspondent last year gave \$100 to a Laotian fighter-plane pilot and was flown to Long Tieng. He spent a day there happily taking pictures, talking with the supposed-to-be un-interviewable Meo general of the supposed-to-be C.I.A.-supported Special Forces in the area, Vang Pao, and having a look at the supposed-to-be secret base.

The Japanese correspondent was thrown in jail by the Laotian authorities when he got back to Vientiane, but through intervention by the Japanese Embassy was out the next day and reportedly sold his pictures for \$1,000.

An American correspondent here got into Long Trèng recently simply because he was invited to a wedding tiere by General Vang Pao. He went to Air America, the commercial airline hired by United States agencies to fly materials to combat and refugee areas of Laos, showed his invitation and was put aboard a plane for Long Tieng.

He said the "secret base" was so unexciting that he did not even write about it.

Roving enemy guerrilla patrols make practically all roads out of Vientiane and other cities and towns in Government-held areas unsafe for anyone as conspicuous as a foreigner. As a result, journalists are unable to take overland routes to combat zones.

Sometimes in Luang Prabang, Savannakhet or Pakse, a suddenly expansive and confident Laotian general will ask a correspondent to go on an offensive operation that is expected to be a success. But such occasions are rare. Usually, Laotian generals are only too pleased to cooperate with the American official policy of secrecy.