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Merry-Go-Round

The Men Behind Laos Drug Traffic



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A ROYAL Laotian prince and the Laotian Army commander have now been identified as the principal traffickers in the heroin used by U.S. troops in South Vietnam.

Furthermore, a Congressional investigation has confirmed our earlier allegations that the Central Intelligence Agency is involved in the Laotian heroin operations.

The investigation was made by Representatives Bob Steele (Dem-Conn.) and Morgan Murphy (Dem-Ill.) both members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

Steele is preparing a report that will allege CIA "Air America" aircraft have been used to transport the drug from northern Laos into the capital city of Vientiane.

It says, however, there is no evidence that the CIA had any official policy of letting its planes be used to move the drugs. Furthermore, it adds that the agency has now cracked down on the practice.

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ACCORDING to the draft report, prepared by Steele for the House Foreign Affairs chairman Tom Morgan (Dem-Pa.), the deadly drug is transported from opium fields in Laos to the battle-manner:

First the raw opium is hauled from northern Laos through Burma and into the Laotian town of Ban Bouei Sai, with former Nationalist Chinese soldiers - turned-drug smugglers riding shotgun on the shipments.

At Ban Bouei Sai, Laotian Army commander General Ouan Rathikoun supervises the shipment of the opium into Vientiane, using American-supplied planes.

Once it reaches Vientiane, the morphine base is processed in Rathikoun's labs into "Number Four" heroin, a pure grade of the deadly drug almost unknown in Southeast Asia until traffickers began turning it out especially for American troops.

The heroin operation is protected and abetted by Prince Boun Oun, inspector general of the realm. The prince gets part of the take.

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ONCE PROCESSED, the heroin is flown into South Vietnam aboard military and civilian aircraft.

Some of the packages of the white powder are air-dropped near U.S. troop emplacements. Others reach the troops after being landed at outlying air strips or flown directly into Saigon's Tan Son Nhut airport.

With Vietnamese custom officials looking the other way, the heroin passes into illicit channels. The Congressman identifies South Vietnamese Premier Tran Thien Kheim as the man behind the corruption of the customs agents, but they stop short of calling him an outright trafficker.

The angriest language in Steele's draft report is reserved for U.S. diplomats who have failed to use their leverage to get the drug traffic cut off at its source.

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