



Southern Force

The CIA's New Army in Laos

By Donald Kirk
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The United States Central Intelligence Agency has armed, equipped and helped to train a 2000-man guerrilla force on and near the Communist-controlled Bolovens plateau in southern Laos.

Highly informed sources here report the CIA has built up the force, composed mainly of local tribesmen, in the past year in response to the threat posed by North Vietnamese troops, who finished overrunning the Bolovens a month ago and now are menacing the Mekong river lowlands.

The CIA, according to these sources, is training tribesmen in half a dozen centers west of the plateau. Lao army officers provide the basic training, these sources said, but CIA operatives advise them and supply arms and ammunition on a daily basis.

Sources compared the buildup in southern Laos of Special Guerilla Unit battalions, as they are known, with the formation a decade ago of a much larger force of Meo tribesmen in the north. The Meo army, after reaching peak strength of 40,000 men in the middle 1960s, has dwindled to approximately 6000 in the process of a series of crushing defeats at the hands of North Vietnamese troops.

TACTICS

Sources here and in the field, which this correspondent visited several weeks ago, indicated the new clandestine battalions would not attempt to confront the North Vietnamese directly — or to recapture ground lost to the enemy. The southern tribesmen specialize in hit-and-run guerrilla tactics aimed at harassing the Communists.

"These guerrilla units are much more aggressive than the Lao soldiers," said an American official. "They know the jungle. They're bush men. They can operate with a pocketful of bullets and a pocketful of rice."

Some sources admitted they were uncertain of the success of guerrilla expeditions. "Sometimes they really do well," said one source, "and sometimes they sit around for a week and hit nothing. Other times it's hard to get accurate reports on just what they do hit."

PAY

One prime inducement for joining a Special Guerrilla Unit is the pay, considerably higher than that granted Lao army soldiers and astronomical compared to the subsistence income on which most tribesmen manage to live.

Sources said the average guerrilla earned the equivalent in Lao currency of around \$50 a month when engaged in full-time field operations. This figure compares with an average Laotian per capita income of approximately \$65 a year.

Another inducement is that recruits are never sent far from the regions where they were born and have lived all their lives. "They're fighting for their ancestral lands," said an official.

Against this view, however, other sources noted that tribesmen tend to desert quite frequently so they can return to their homes and visit friends and relatives.

Lao officials — and their advisers — attempt to imbue some sense of national spirit into guerrillas during their training. "There's not that much you can tell them about jungle fighting," said one military source, "but you can try to propagandize them some."