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Envoy's Brush With Death On Laos Mission Reported

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VIENTIANE — American Ambassador to Laos G. McMurtie Godley was nearly killed by Lao Communist troops in North Laos when he inadvertently attempted a helicopter landing on a position they held in North Laos late last month, well informed sources said here today.

Sources said the incident happened Dec. 21 at a Communist-held village called Pak Ou, 15 miles north of Laos royal capital of Luang Prabang.

The ambassador despite a warning from a fellow passenger, Gen. Chao Sinh Saysana, Laos first military region commander, that the area was Communist controlled, indicated to the American pilot that he should land at the helicopter pad.

Source said the Communists learned of the helicopter's intention to land and zeroed in their weapons on the pad from a rocky bluff at the junction of the Mekong and Ou rivers, where Pak Ou stands.

Boatmen Furnished Clues

A factor which saved Godley's life, according to these sources, was that the pilot noticed sudden efforts by Lao boatmen to get out of the vi-



G. McMURTRIE GODLEY

cinity of landing zone. He made a low-level approach, then hovered a few feet above the landing zone without touching down.

Communist troops, believing the helicopter had already landed, opened up with a barrage of rocket, mortar and small arms fire.

Two B40 rockets passed just underneath the helicopter and a 60mm. mortar exploded to the side of it, the rockets and small arms fire missing only because the helicopter was

still a few feet off the ground.

The U.S. Army captain flying the helicopter put on full throttle, and went into a steep bank across Mekong, bringing the ambassador out unscathed.

Others Aboard

It is understood that chief U.S. military attache Army Col. Broaddus Bailey and other high-ranking U.S. officials were also aboard the helicopter. This was second time in six months that Ambassador Godley has flirted with death at the hands of the Communists.

During the fierce fighting around the south Laos town of Khong Sedone in the middle of last year, a North Vietnamese soldier fired a B40 rocket through the wing of a twin-engined Baron light aircraft in which Godley was flying while viewing the battle area.

The Laos war is run by the State Department and Godley, as the department's representative here, is in the unusual position of overseeing U.S. air strikes and handling of the private army of 30,000 Laotians which U.S. forces raised here because of the royal army failures through corruption and mismanagement.

The ambassador, who usually flies high to avoid risks, likes to see the battle terrain, sources said.