

VIENTIANE, Laos — Still savoring his cigar after a three-course luncheon washed down with French wines, G. McMurtrie Godley answered the telephone, postponed his tennis game, dashed to his sedan and was driven off at top speed.

"Wheatburner 50 to Wheatburner Base," he intoned into the car's radio-telephone, "heading for airport — ten-four." The rush mission of American Ambassador Godley on an otherwise sleepy recent afternoon in the Laotian capital turned out to be a false alarm of sorts. There was just a chance that three captured American pilots North Vietnam had agreed to release might be on board the regular weekly Aeroflot flight which was arriving from Hanoi ahead of schedule. And "Mac" Godley wanted to be on hand just in case the men accepted his personal suggestion they disembark and accept U.S. government transportation home rather than continue in the company of their antiwar chaperones.

While Russians in sports shirts and North Vietnamese in pith helmets and business suits streamed off the Ilyushin 18, Godley saw that the pilots were not among the passengers, got back into the car and headed home to change for tennis. "Forty-five minutes is about all the tennis I can take in this age anyway."

At 55, Godley has been going at this pace for more than three years in Laos and, for that matter, ever since he graduated from Yale, class of '39. Part proconsul, part traditional striped-pants diplomat and part general, Godley personally directs the no longer quite so secret American war in Laos —and loves every minute of it.

He has no doubts about his job or how to carry it out even though his critics suspect he is more Defense Secretary Melvin Laird's man in Vientiane than Secretary of State William Rogers. "Call me field marshal if it makes you feel better," he is inclined to say. "I don't care. But please note I've got no troops."

"Uncle Sugar"

INVOLVED in undercover work since World War II when he dealt with American prisoner of war problems while based in Switzerland, one of the first U.S. diplomats to work closely with the military, activist ambassador to the Congo during the "Simba" revolt in 1964, Godley believes in the American world mission in uncomplicated terms uncomfortable to more doubting Americans.

So big and burly that Congolese called him "The Bear that Walks Like a Man" when he was ambassador in Leopoldville, Godley maintains, "I think I've had the very best of the U.S. Foreign Service" and "if I end up being the fall guy I couldn't care less."

"They weren't ten deep for the Laos assignment, but I just pinch myself daily when I think I'm being paid for doing this."

—G. McMurtrie Godley

Our Man In Vientiane

By Jonathan C. Randal
Washington Post Foreign Service

Godley is given to pithy, direct language of a nature which an earlier age would not have found repeatable in mixed company. Pure product of the Cold War in warm climates, he invariably refers to the United States as "Uncle Sugar," a sobriquet reflecting the persuasiveness of American power in underdeveloped countries.

Even with a staff of 1,200 diplomatic, military and CIA men, as ambassador to this Oregon-sized country Godley has his hands full:

- Requesting and approving all American air strikes against North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao troops—who numbered over 100,000 just before the Easter invasion of South Vietnam—in northern Laos and along the Ho Chi Minh supply trails leading south to Cambodia and South Vietnam.

- Directing CIA military operations and the activities of some 230 military attaches whose tasks include supplying arms and ammunition to the Royal Lao army, Meo tribesmen and Thai volunteers in the Plain of Jars north of Vientiane and in the southern Laos panhandle.

- Keeping able neutralist Premier Souvanna Phouma in office despite repeated right-wing efforts to dislodge him, to ensure that the tatty facade on the 1962 accords remains intact for another effort to neutralize Laos in the event of an Indochina-wide peace settlement, a task even the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao representatives here privately concede he performed brilliantly in the past month.

- Maintaining the precarious and artificial Laotian economy within the limits of a congressional aid ceiling of

\$350 million annually, a far from easy task since most of the money goes for military spending. Indeed, the annual threat of the fall of the CIA's base at Long Cheng on the Plain of Jars is feared less than the economic crisis reflected by the fall in value of the Laotian kip from 500 to 800 to the dollar in the past year.

Dropping the Veils

FOR MOST of Godley's first year as ambassador, and indeed since the 1962 Geneva accords were broken first by North Vietnam and then by the United States, American military involvement was kept as secret as possible. But in the past year or so, Washington has progressively dropped the principal fiction imposed by the Geneva accords which set up the tripartite right-wing, neutralist and left-wing government under big power auspices: a promise to avoid any foreign military establishment in Laos except for a small French training mission.

As early as 1964, the United States was deeply committed to the Souvanna Phouma government, providing aid, a stabilization fund for the kip and military help. In return, Souvanna Phouma allowed the United States to bomb North Vietnamese positions on the strength of a verbal understanding which even now remains the only basis for American military operations here.

In March, 1970, President Nixon started lifting the secrecy after a Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee headed by Stuart Symington held hearings on Laos as part of its investigation of U.S. commitments abroad. Whatever major mystery was left dis-



Godley on the Plain of Jars in 1970 (one of the jars is in foreground).

appeared last December when U.S. officials put on a guided tour of Long Cheng, headquarters of Gen. Vang Pao's CIA-paid mercenaries on the rim of the Plain of Jars. The base was in danger of falling to the North Vietnamese and it was apparently deemed wiser to let the press see the base rather than learning about it from triumphant enemy propaganda.

The "Congo Mafia"

PERHAPS UNDERSTANDABLY, Godley's staff has drawn heavily on men who served in the Congo in the early and middle Sixties. Indeed at one point the deputy chief of mission, CIA station chief and several important deputies, a U.S. Information Service staffer and several young diplomats all were part of what is known as Godley's "Congo Mafia."

Although ambassadors are allowed wide latitude in choosing their staffs, Godley swears he hand-picked only one of his former Congo associates: Monteagle Stearns, until recently the deputy chief of mission, who left a soft berth in the London embassy when Godley offered him a chance to "rejoin the real Foreign Service." The others, Godley feels, logically ended up here because of the similarity of the skills and experience which stood them in good stead in the Congo.

"You look at the State Department's personnel structure and of 1,500 officers there may be 250 with facility in

French," Godley explained, "then 75 without family problems of one sort or another, perhaps 50 who are gung-ho, dedicated and not yellow, and then you choose the best. It's only normal that two out of three have been in the other, similar area."

In the Congo, one of the most successful — some would say just plain lucky — exercises of American military and political power, the United States was instrumental in holding the country together. From 1960 to January 1963, the United States provided the muscle behind the United Nations effort to repress rebellions in the center, northeast and southeast of the country.

But less than 18 months after the United States helped the U.N. troops scatter mercenary soldiers, end the secession of copper-producing Katanga province and send its leader, Moïse Tshombe, off to European exile, he was back again as prime minister of the entire country in July 1964. Faced with a Chinese-backed uprising which spread across the country, Godley backed Tshombe, brought in CIA-paid Cuban pilots to fly T-28 fighters, World War II B-26 bombers and U.S. Air Force C-130 transports which flew Belgian-financed white mercenaries around the country.

Within a year of its inception the rebellion collapsed after a combined U.S.-Belgian paratroop drop on Stanleyville which rescued hundreds of European refugees. "It was a shoestring operation," recalled one of Godley's Congo Mafia. "Our military aid started at \$3 million and ended up costing \$9 million for the entire year 1964."

"A Frustrated Soldier"

LIKE MANY OTHERS who served there, Godley is nostalgic about the Congo and likes to wear a brightly colored print shirt depicting President Joseph Desire Mobutu. Such sentiment is all the more touching since Godley had to have himself withdrawn as ambassador in October 1966, after he

grounded the Congolese air force to keep Mobutu from napalming rebellious white mercenaries in Stanleyville.

Godley rates his Congolese experience as "invaluable" in teaching the practical application of limited military and diplomatic operations. He figures he spent 20 per cent of his time on military problems in the Congo but now devotes as much as 70 per cent of his efforts to them here. Only part of his long days is spent with large war maps on the walls of his windowless ground-floor embassy office.

"I'm a frustrated soldier," Godley concedes in noting his active military service is limited to two years' naval duty from 1939 to 1941, when he went into government work. But for Godley, who admits to being intrigued by such weaponry as M-79 grenade launchers, doing his job is "getting the hell out into the field. You cannot do anything sitting behind a desk and reacting."

Flying in helicopters and light planes of the U.S. government-chartered Air America or Continental Air Service, Godley likes to put down on dirt strips and see for himself. "I try to get out as much as possible, partly for morale purposes to see my field hands who risk their lives—and to encourage Laotian officials to do likewise," he said, "but also because I never go out without learning something from the military attaches and CIA teams, some of whom have been here 8, 10, 12 years."

Godley's appreciation of the military dates back to a tour as first secretary in the Paris embassy in the early Fifties, where he worked on NATO infrastructure and on securing French agreement for American bases to be built for the alliance in the then French Morocco. Back in Washington in 1958 after a tour in Cambodia, he was involved in planning the U.S. landing during the Lebanese civil war.

"I was horrified by the vacuum between both sides of the Potomac," he recalled. He later was instrumental in



setting up an exchange program for State and Defense Department officers.

An Earlier Breed

BOTH IN THE CONGO and Laos, he believes the United States has been successful in "careful orchestration of U.S. military might under tight political controls."

"With a minimum of equipment and zero commitment we are killing 30 North Vietnamese a day," he added, as well as tying up large enemy units which otherwise could be used against South Vietnam. Yet with much of the air support coming from nearby bases in Thailand, Laos remains a sideshow to the South Vietnamese theater and there is no really independent American policy for Laos.

Even critics among the Laotians and his fellow diplomats credit Godley with smooth crisis management although they decry U.S. policy here and throughout Indochina.

"A classic diplomat couldn't and wouldn't do this kind of job," said a diplomat in a backhanded compliment. He described Godley's role as falling somewhere short of the total powers of a Marshal Louis Lyautey who built French Morocco with a free hand, or a Lt. Gen. Sir Sidney Clive, who expanded British power in India unfettered by the restraints of modern instant communications.

But there is something of an earlier breed about Godley and the men who work for him here.

A Congo veteran who also served in Vietnam took a perverse pride in the Nixon administration's attitude towards Laos. "Here we've done more with less," he said. "Maybe some places have had too many assets for their own good."

Godley works with Congress looking over one shoulder. "We cannot afford to jettison a single rocket pod here without accounting for it under the Symington restrictions," one American said.

Moreover, the Laos war is conducted with strange ground rules under which the North Vietnamese hold much of the country—if not the population—but do not seek to take over the rich plain around Vientiane or other cities further to the south along the Mekong River. Hanoi's forbearance is apparently based on fears that Thailand would intervene were its borders along the Mekong threatened.

"I Pinch Myself Daily"

OBSERVERS BELIEVE Godley's main problem is less defending the Long Cheng base—which once again is under threat of enemy capture in the upcoming dry season—than in stabilizing the increasingly critical economic situation. His critics complain that more than a decade of American largesse has produced a thin crust of Mercedes owners but overall pauperization, corruption and no sign of efficient administration. But even an ambassador who opposes Godley conceded that "given American policy here, I don't think he has had much choice."

The critics worry that Godley's close relations with Souvanna Phouma have caught the Laotian leader in a vise; "Souvanna Phouma uses American support to bolster his own bargaining power, but that means his government is dependent on the United States—a quite a tightrope act."

Yet on a recent Sunday, in between playing with his wife, Betty, and their two adopted young Greek children, Godley managed to confer twice with the premier, read four hours of reports and discuss the military situation with an aide.

Godley is not one to reflect on the justifications of United States policy—at least not in public. But a man who worked with him in the Congo put it in one-dimensional terms that so many Americans have come to reject in the past decade. "It sounds corny," the man said, "but those of us here believe in our country and believe what we are doing is right for the world."

For Godley, there are more nuances. "They weren't ten deep for the Laos assignment," he said in characteristically admitting he bucked for the job, "but I just pinch myself daily when I think I'm being paid for doing this."
