

Learning Quickly on the Job

Gathering Intelligence in Laos in 1968

Frederic McCann

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refugees and ralliers
who had fled from the
communist Pathet Lao
guerrillas.**
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In 1968, I was sent from Tokyo to Laos to interview refugees and ralliers from the communist Pathet Lao guerrillas who had fled to the protection of royalist Gen. Vang Pao's army of Meo hill tribe "irregulars." Busy with things Japanese, I knew little about the conflicts in former French colonial Indochina except that the insurgent Pathet Lao were supported and supplied by the North Vietnamese. The only thing going for me was that I had studied French in high school and college.

Passing through Thailand, I was given a knapsack for all my worldly possessions, a set of fatigues, a pair of boots, and a baseball cap, which I later exchanged for an Australian bush hat. Vang Pao, who supported the Royal Kingdom of Laos in the expanding local war, had crossed eastward across the Plaine des Jarres in northern Laos. I was ferried to various Laotian towns, whose names I cannot recall, passing through a bleak, mountainous countryside. After receiving the requisite handshake from Vang Pao, I finally settled into a small Royal Lao Army outpost called Pha Khao, located in the southern part of the Plaine des Jarres.

Since there were only a few intelligence officers in Laos during the Pathet Lao rebellion, I hope this anecdote will help to convey the flavor of that time.¹

Frederic McCann served in the CIA Directorate of Operations.



Author, on one of the ancient clay vessels in the Plaine des Jarres, 1968.

First Lesson

On my first day on the job, I met my interpreter, a spit-and-polish Thai captain named My. He had received some military training in the United States and spoke good English. Unfortunately, he had not been exposed to American standards of intelligence work and proceeded to mistreat the Laotians I had selected to interview. With open disdain, he would gruffly order them to stand up, sit down, and not speak unless spoken to. Since he communicated in Lao, it took me awhile to realize that he was

¹ This anecdote, written 30 years after the event and completely from memory, was initially prompted by a notice that the Library of Congress was creating a collection of personal stories of military experiences.

Laos

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frightening the interviewees to the point that providing me with information was the last thing that interested them. This was my introduction to the myriad racial animosities germane to the Indochina peninsula.

After two wasted days of frightening Laotians, I called a halt to the interviews and asked Captain My to take me through the refuge

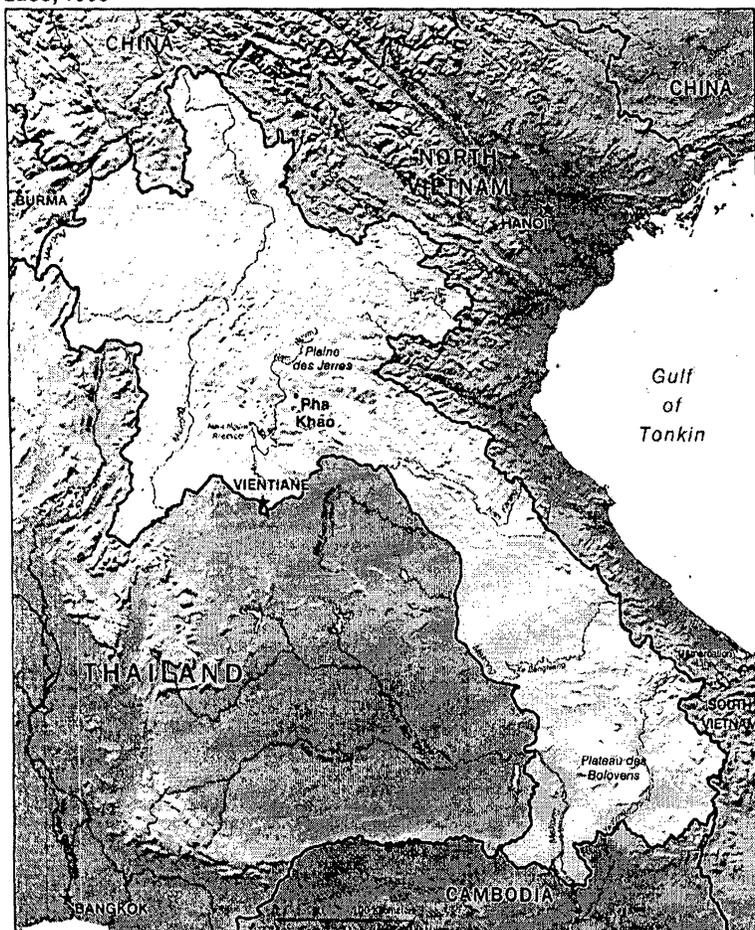
camp. It was the same kind of camp that surrounded all Royal Lao Army posts, inhabited by

hangers-on seeking food, work, or maybe information that could be put into the rat-line to the enemy. The locals were openly curious about me as I walked around bowing to the elders, patting little boys on the head, and repeating the only Lao words I knew, which were the equivalent of "good day." We came upon a soldier washing a Pathet Lao uniform. As I approached, he sprang to attention and gave me a French military salute. I returned an American salute and greeted him with "good day" in French. When I asked the captain why I had not had the opportunity to interview this man instead of the poor farmers and their wives with babies at the breast, I received a sheepish response that this Pathet Lao soldier had only entered the camp late the previous night and had not "been processed."

Second Lesson

I immediately drew the conclusion that someone at the camp was in charge of my activities and it wasn't me. We changed that on the spot with a few strong words to Captain My. I instructed him to take this soldier to the warehouse for new clothes and shoes and get him a meal at the mess hall, and keep me informed of all new military arrivals in the camp. I nodded to the soldier and asked My to give him my name and tell me his. He said his name was Thanh, and he repeated my name as "Mister Fred." We shook hands and My told him that we would talk after he had eaten. Thanh readily agreed.

Laos, 1968



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Before interviewing Thanh, I rearranged my office with three chairs around a coffee table. I explained to Captain My that he would sit off to one side and truly be the interpreter, which was absolutely essential because neither Thanh nor I had a full command of the French language. I instructed him never to speak to Thanh unless I told him to do so and to say exactly what I said. Thanh and I would attempt to converse in French, but if we could not find the right word, I would say the word in English and My would say the word in Lao to Thanh. We would then try to continue to converse in French. My was a bit stiff about all this but cooperative.

Testing A New Approach

When Thanh arrived at my office, I instructed the escorts to return to their posts, saying that Captain My and I would bring the detainee back. It took some doing for the captain to carry out my wishes, but eventually the escorts complied. This brief skirmish was not lost on Thanh and, I think, helped him decide that I was in charge of the interview even though we were on a Royal Army base.

I showed Thanh to a chair and offered him a cigarette. When he took it, I placed the pack in front of him, indicating it was for him. When I took out a fresh pack for myself, I saw a smile cross his face. It was clear that he was not used to the simplest of kindnesses.

I explained to Thanh that I wanted to talk to him about his life and his time as a Pathet Lao soldier. I outlined My's role, which was to assist us. Thanh would speak directly to me in French and only use the interpreter when necessary. Thanh and I both recognized the challenge.

We got off to a great start. Thanh was about 21 years old. He had been born in Vientienne, the capital of Laos. Three years before, the Pathet Lao had kidnapped him while he was a student at the French Pedagogical Institute in Vientiane, leaving behind a pregnant wife. His captors had first taken him to the Pathet Lao stronghold in Sam Neua Province. Later, he had received training as a finance officer in Hanoi. His most recent assignment had been to distribute Pathet Lao funds to various units of the guerrilla force. Thanh stated that he had defected to the Royal Army outpost with the hope of joining his wife and seeing his child.

Debriefing

Because of his finance duties, I suspected that Thanh knew the current location of each Pathet Lao unit, its strength, and maybe the name of the commanding

officer. To involve Captain My in my intelligence gathering activity, I explained to him that I wanted to create an Order of Battle (OB) for the Pathet Lao force. I asked him to obtain a map of Laos and work directly with Thanh to put all of his knowledge directly on the map. I conveyed to the captain that his military experience was most important and my role in this activity was unnecessary. "So, please work directly with Thanh, and treat him in a friendly way like you would a fellow officer," I requested. While he went for the map, I explained our plan to Thanh.

Both men were up to the task and created an Order of Battle in French and English within a day or two. When the OB was sent to Gen. Vang Pao, he made a special trip to Pha Khao, congratulated Captain My, and made Thanh an officer in his irregular army. This action was unique because his force was composed of ethnic Meo while Thanh was an ethnic Lao. (I heard later that the general had been encouraged to integrate his force and that he often pointed to this event as his first step.)

These fortunate developments changed my relationship with Captain My. In short order, he came to me and, in private, said that he now understood my way of obtaining cooperation and useful information. He thanked me for the lesson and from that day became "my captain." He started calling me "Papa Fred," because I had begun to grow a gray beard à la Ernest Hemingway.

Laos

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Unfolding events also solidified my relationship with Thanh. While he was preparing the OB, I asked the Royal Lao Army to locate his wife in Vientiane and bring her and their child to Pha Khao, if she wanted to come. Without telling Thanh, I took him to the airstrip when the plane arrived. When he saw his family, he embraced his wife and scooped up his child. Then he came to me and thanked me. With a wink, I said “I am now your mandarin and you must obey me.” He saw the humor of my being a Chinese lord and replied, “I will serve you loyally as long as you fill my rice bowl and protect me.” We began a great relationship for two men who could barely converse in a third language with one another.

One Thing Led to Another

One morning, Thanh came to me and informed me that a Pathet Lao officer had rallied the night before. His name was Sung, and he had been Thanh’s superior officer. As the senior finance officer, Sung had had daily contact with the Pathet Lao leadership.

Unfortunately, when he rallied, he was carrying a knapsack full of Pathet Lao money. When a Royal Army officer tried to take the money, Sung began to fight and broke the officer’s arm. Consequently, Royal Lao soldiers took Sung to a cave in a nearby mountain and beat him, intending to kill him the next day.

I immediately went to the post commander and told him that I would not remain on the post if they killed a rallier. I charged that such a killing would shut off the flow of ralliers from the Pathet Lao, which General Vang Pao would not look kindly upon. Lastly, I told him that Sung might have crucial information on the Pathet Lao leadership and I wanted to interview him. The commander agreed to turn Sung over to Captain My after the noon meal.

Sung was brought to me in chains. I insisted that he be freed and that his guards return to their posts. It took Captain My some time to carry out my wishes, but he was successful. Thanh was in the room and welcomed Sung warmly. He explained to Sung that I had saved his life and he suggested that he cooperate with me. Sung was apprehensive but agreed.

We began to produce reports on the Pathet Lao leaders, including their attitude toward the peace negotiations taking place in Paris. Of unusual interest was their use of narcotics, given to them by their Vietnamese wives, who reportedly had been trained in China on how to administer the drugs and control their husbands. Throughout, Sung was cooperative and informative.

A New Twist

One day when Thanh, Sung, and I were sitting in my office, Captain My came into the room and interrupted us. “I have just interviewed a new arrival who has told me that the Pathet Lao plan to overrun this camp next week,” he told me in English. I asked him to tell Thanh and Sung in Lao, and he did so. When he finished, Sung spoke quietly to Thanh, and I saw My place his hand on his weapon. Immediately, I asked Thanh what Sung was saying. He replied, “Sung says that the Pathet Lao will overrun this camp 10 days after the full moon and that will be the third day of next week.”

Needless to say, we all recognized the seriousness of Sung’s knowledge of the pending attack. I pushed my chair back from the table and placed my hand on Captain My’s arm because he had begun to speak directly to Sung. I asked Thanh to ask Sung how he knew about this plan. Sung spoke at length to Thanh, during which time the captain put his hand on his weapon again.

The scene became tense. I was the only one who did not know why. Thanh slowly told me the following: “Sung says that he did not come here as a deserter. He got caught stealing the foreign exchange holdings of the Pathet Lao, and they sent him here on a mission rather than put him in jail. The bag of Pathet Lao money was a smoke screen. He was sent here to kill you. But, since you saved his life, he promises never to hurt you.”

I asked Thanh if Sung would tell us if the information he had provided about the Pathet Lao leadership was true. Thanh asked, and Sung nodded. Sung had become very quiet. He sat with his head bowed in embarrassment. Thanh relayed, "Sung says that his information is true, and it seems true to me based on my limited observation of the leadership."

I suggested to Captain My that he return Sung to detention so that we could concentrate on preparing a report to the base commander. When Sung stood up, he spoke briefly to Thanh who translated for me: "Sung says that he has watched us shake hands with each other and he has never done that. I have been coaching him how to do it, and he would like to shake your hand as a sign of mutual respect." I stood up and extended my hand, which Sung took and said, "merci." I

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returned the handshake and repeated "merci."

The Ultimate Lesson

This exchange made me realize that I had never been briefed on the potential dangers of being in Pha Khao. Up to that point, US intelligence had been unaware that the Pathet Lao would go to the extreme of targeting non-combatant Americans.

After briefing a skeptical base commander about the possibility of an attack, I returned to my office and informed Vientiane by

wire of my report. Since the end of my short-term assignment was overdue, I requested air transportation to the camp in Thailand where I had left my clothes and where I could catch a plane to Bangkok and on to Hong Kong, where my wife was waiting. While in Bangkok, I read that the Pathet Lao had indeed overrun the base at Pha Khao. I hoped that my two Lao friends had managed to escape, but I was never able to find out.

Sobered by my personal experience, when I returned to Laos five years later in another capacity, I was not surprised to hear that the Pathet Lao had broken a truce they had agreed to and violated the rules for their participation in a coalition government. Nor was I surprised later at their ruthlessness in wiping out the Meo tribe when they took over the government of Laos in 1975.