

*How to obtain North Vietnamese
soldiers for intelligence in Laos*

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CASH ON DELIVERY

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Through the early years of the fighting in Laos, technology was the primary source of intelligence about the enemy, and it left something to be desired. The jungle canopy frustrated photography, sensors which counted trucks or marching units could not determine what they were carrying, and the enemy order of battle derived from communications intelligence was less than complete.

Human sources were needed to fill the gaps. Friendly sources were available, and did yeoman service on such missions as road watch teams and reconnaissance. A more useful human source, however, would be the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) soldier. Pathet Lao sources were of minimal value—they had little access to NVA activities or plans, and were not sufficiently interested in NVA unit designations to provide adequate order of battle intelligence.

Five years into the war in Laos, NVA defectors or prisoners of war were few and far between.

What was needed was an aggressive program to provoke defection or to snatch NVA soldiers bodily from their environment. And for success in any snatch program, it would first be necessary to overcome the conviction of the average government soldier that all North Vietnamese were ogres 10 feet tall.

For assets, there were the Paramilitary Team Operations, a little-known companion program to the highly publicized Meo irregular battalions of General Vang Pao. The majority of these irregular guerrilla intelligence collection teams came from the area of Saravane Province and the Bolovens Plateau region, where NVA troops were more vulnerable than they were along the main routes of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. At a considerable distance from their supply bases, their hold on the territory not consolidated, they bivouacked their troops in or near villages, and they sought supplies from the villagers. NVA support and service soldiers began to move through the area in small groups or alone, as couriers or foragers, or on reconnaissance. Later on, during 1971 and 1972, deserters began leaving NVA units in combat, trying to make their way home to North Vietnam or find asylum in the villages.

These villages, however—in contrast to the Ho Chi Minh Trail area where most of the villagers had left—turned out to be the friendly “sea” in which the “fish” of the irregular guerrilla intelligence teams could swim.

Each of these teams normally had a team leader, a deputy, and a Morse operator, along with enough team members for an average total strength of eight men. At times, there were as many as twelve, or as few as two. Sometimes they wore uniform, sometimes native dress, and they carried a variety of weapons, from AK-47 or M-2 carbines to Colt .45s and hand grenades. They used VHF portable voice radios and Delco CW radios (PRC-64s).

The teams were encouraged to remain in the field for at least 30 days per mission, and often extended to 60 or 90 days with light resupply drops. Mem-

bers received a regular base salary—ranging in 1970 from \$16 a month for a team member to \$26 for a team leader—and additional mission pay of \$1 for each day spent on assignment in the field.

The real incentive under this system was the mission pay; salary could in effect be doubled simply by doing—or, unfortunately, by faking—a modicum of assigned work in the field. But where was there enough incentive to persuade the irregulars to lay one of those 10-foot NVA ogres by the heels?

The mission pay was intended to be payment for results, but it had the weakness, first, that it allowed for no differentiation to recognize either quality or quantity of results, and second, most of the missions were of such a nature that it was difficult for the headquarters to verify the results claimed.

The Bounty System

Out of these difficulties, the case officer handling Paramilitary Team Operations in Military Region IV of southern Laos came up in 1970 with a simple solution to bring rational cupidity to bear on primitive fear. He told selected guerrilla teams that they would receive *no* daily mission pay, but instead could share \$1,000 for each live NVA officer delivered to the base, \$400 for each NCO, and \$200 for each NVA private—Cash On Delivery.

It worked. The first reliable guerrilla teams who were offered this scheme declined, preferring to remain on regular assignment and daily mission pay, but pressure was maintained to cajole them into trying an abduction in return for the premium. The first successful effort, in fact, was by such a team on another mission which found the premium overpowering their fears when they spotted an opportunity to bring in an NVA sergeant. After several such successes by reliable teams, the case officer began calling in the more marginal teams and putting them on abduction missions without any option—and without mission pay. If they failed, they would be terminated; if they succeeded, they would earn the bounty and be allowed to return to regular missions at mission pay.

In November 1970, Lao guerrilla intelligence teams were able to induce the defection of a NVA sergeant, the first time in the Lao war that RLG soldiers were able to bring a NVA soldier under their control by means other than his voluntary walk into an RLG position or his capture in a dazed or wounded condition on the battlefield. It was the first successful aggressive operation specifically designed to pluck a NVA soldier out of the NVA environment. It began like this:

Team Cranberry operated in an area five kilometers south of the southern provincial capital of Saravane during September and October of 1970. Their principal informant, [] had advised the team leader during their last meeting prior to the team's withdrawal that it was possible to capture a NVA officer. Team Lime, led by [] a reliable and authenticated team leader, was briefed and sent into the same area to collect intelligence and tried to work with [] on his capture plan. [] decided to brief every informant that Team Lime was interested in capturing NVA soldiers. This simple step paid an immediate dividend.

A former RLG soldier, living about three kilometers south of Saravane and serving as an informant of Team Lime, knew of an NVA soldier who was living with a local Lao girl whose father was ethnic Vietnamese. The informant, [] went to see the father and enlisted his aid in convincing the NVA.

soldier to defect to the RLG so he could marry his girlfriend and live in Laos. [] and the father successfully did just that, and [] was able to lead NVA Sergeant [] to the Team Lime command post, whence he was taken by helicopter to the RLG military headquarters at Pakse. Unknown to [] was the fact that Sgt. [] was not only vulnerable in his relationship to the Lao girl, but had deserted his unit during a RLG Air Force bombing attack just a few days before [] proposed defection.

Team Lime thus concluded the first successful operation, and was replaced by Team Cranberry, led by [] who decided to recontact [] and go after a NVA soldier. He was confident that if Team Lime could do it, he could, too. It might be added that [] was impressed by the \$400 that Team Lime received to divide among six men for 20 days' work. For team members, this was more than three times the dollar-a-day mission incentive pay.

The First Abduction

[] and [] put their heads together and, after reviewing possible ambush sites, decided on a small trail [] knew was often used by NVA soldiers traveling alone. After three days of waiting in ambush alongside this trail Team Cranberry got lucky on 2 January 1971. A single NVA soldier riding a bicycle approached the team which was hidden in high grass on each side of the trail. One team member and [] stationed in plain view, tried to hail the soldier. When it did not seem that he was going to stop, the team member charged the bicycle and bowled over the NVA soldier. He was immediately joined by the rest of the team, who hauled the struggling soldier into the grass, trussed him up, and while one team member removed the bicycle from the scene, moved off to the Team Cranberry command post for successful delivery by helicopter. The captured soldier was Corporal []

As a result of the defection of Sgt. [] and the capture of Cpl. [] intelligence analysts in Laos received the first reliable human source order of battle information on the 968th NVA Group, a command unit for military operations in Southern Laos. In addition, Sgt. [] reported that a major effort would be made to capture all of the Bolovens Plateau including the key city of Paksong. The NVA did mount such an effort throughout 1971.

Meanwhile, Team Cranberry decided to remain in the field and try again. They had successfully pulled the first abduction of a NVA soldier in enemy-held territory, and their case officer was anxious to keep them working. The team was expanded from the eight men who had snatched Cpl. [] to a 20-men team, divided into a five-man command post and three five-man snatch units. Each snatch unit was augmented by from three to five informants, who were to spot vulnerable NVA soldiers and then participate in the abduction. The snatch units fanned out in three directions and by 15 January 1971 had accomplished their second abduction.

Pfc. [] was assigned to work in a supply depot with 25 other NVA in Khanchom village, three kilometers northwest of Saravane. Two of Team Cranberry's informants lived in Khanthalat village, one kilometer south of Khanchom, and were acquainted with Pfc. [] villagers were not allowed in Khanchom, but the informants knew that Pfc. [] often traveled

alone from Khanchom and always returned through Khanthalat where he stopped to visit his Lao friends. While six team members waited a few hundred meters away in the forest, the two informants went to await Pfc. [] along the trail from Khanthalat to Khanchom.

As Pfc. [] emerged from the village he spied the two and hailed them. They talked a bit and told [] they wanted to walk with him to Khanchom to ask for rice. Pfc. [] agreed and they all continued along the trail. Soon a third team member joined them and said he too was going to seek rice at Khanchom. At this [] became suspicious, since it was very unusual for any Lao villager to try to beg rice from a NVA depot, let alone three of them at one time. The third team member, spotting [] suspiciousness, gave the high sign in their tribal dialect, and all three pounced on him. Pfc. [] kicked and fought, biting one Lao on the thumb, but was subdued, tied by the wrists and elbows with parachute suspension line and taken to headquarters by helicopter, together with a triumphant Team Cranberry.

There was little of intelligence interest from [] interrogation, but his abduction was of great service operationally: it buttressed the argument that NVA soldiers were vulnerable to abduction or defection by a resourceful Laotian guerrilla team.

From Informant to Team Leader

Team Cranberry's departure left [] behind, hoping to continue sharing bounties with any team as willing to use his information as Lime and Cranberry had been. He was disappointed, however, because for the next three months the teams were unable to make contact with him. He then spent the ensuing three months on the run, seeking the safety of an RLG area. The North Vietnamese had learned of his informant role.

He finally reached Pakse, where he walked into Guerrilla Team Operations headquarters to volunteer as a team member. Recognizing his value in abduction operations, the case officer accepted [] as a team leader, and trained him and a radio operator in the *modus operandi* of the guerrilla teams. Then [] now operating as "Team Pomelo," went back into the field in August 1971, and by 18 September had succeeded in capturing Sgt. [] of the NVA 9th Regiment.

Sgt. [] had been in combat at Paksong against RLG forces when he decided to desert and return to North Vietnam. Heading north, he had covered almost 50 kilometers when he stopped to rest for the night in the village of Kiang Phoukhong. The village chief, a Team Pomelo informant, made his way to the team hideout and told [] that an NVA soldier was going to spend the night at his house. [] and his radio operator returned to the village with the chief, bringing with them an ample supply of lao-lao, the local moonshine. They proceeded to get the tired and emotionally distraught NVA sergeant thoroughly drunk by the time their supply ran out, and invited him to another house to find more lao-lao.

As they left the chief's house, [] and his radio operator draped their arms around Sgt. [] shoulders as if to support the staggering sergeant, but halfway down the steps the friendly arms tightened into vise-like grips on his head and shoulders. They subdued him and delivered him to a helicopter landing zone. At headquarters, Sgt. [] provided important order of battle infor-

mation about the 9th Regiment, then the principal NVA unit in heavy contact with RLG forces near Paksong.

This was not the end of [] contributions. In January 1972 he successfully induced the defection of Sgt. [] Hoi, a mechanic-driver in a transportation pool of the 968th NVA Group. Sgt. [] was an ethnic Vietnamese, but had been born in Vientiane and had talked to [] of owning his own taxi some day—a capitalistic pipe dream from the Hanoi viewpoint. [] urged him to defect with the argument that his birth in Laos would help him obtain Laotian acceptance, and that his dream was much more likely to come true in a free Laos than in a Communist North Vietnam. [] bought the pitch and defected.

The Capable Brigand

The most successful Lao guerrilla team leader ever to stalk the NVA on abduction missions was probably [] the leader of Team Tomato. His past performance was inauspicious: returning overland in January 1971 from a roadwatch mission along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, he had refused to make the necessary signals for evacuation, and was taking a month to make his way back to base at an unproductive dollar-a-day per man. He was then advised by radio that the ruse would *not* earn any extra mission pay, and that he would probably be fired. [] "resigned" instead, returning to his home village after telling the team members to report him killed in action. He then sent his wife to claim an indemnity for survivors of team members killed in action.

The case officer flatly informed the wife that he did not believe [] had been killed, and that the indemnity would not be paid. While a glum [] was pondering his next move, he heard about the bounties offered for NVA soldiers, and the successes of Teams Line and Cranberry. He reasoned that if he could catch an NVA soldier, he could rehabilitate himself. With the aid of another former team member, he set out to redeem his job.

NVA 2nd Lt. [] of the F31 Reconnaissance Company and 1st Lt. [] of the 3rd Battalion, 968th Group returning from a reconnaissance, had stopped to make camp for the night near [] village. As [] and his assistant hid and watched, 1st Lt. [] began to bathe in a stream, while 2nd Lt. [] followed nature's call into the jungle. They followed 2nd Lt. [] and caught him literally with his pants down. Under the circumstances, it was relatively easy to subdue, gag, and hogtie him. They then turned their attention to 1st Lt. [] who was still bathing, and managed to subdue him. [] then secured the arms of both prisoners, but left their legs free for the 50-kilometer overland hike to guerrilla team headquarters.

On 28 April 1971, [] and his partner appeared at the base, leading the two bedraggled NVA officers by neck ropes. [] announced that he would deliver them, only to the guerrilla team case officer

[] was a very truculent prisoner and refused to talk, but the [] had no such scruples, and outlined the complete order of battle of the NVA military command for all of southern Laos. He also reported an NVA plan to conduct a major offensive in May, 1971, which took place and resulted in the loss of Paksong.

[redacted] was an instant hero, albeit marked as a rogue and brigand and a man who would have to be carefully handled. The case officer refused to pay [redacted] mission pay for his failed roadwatch mission, which he had the nerve to ask for, but did agree to pay the monthly salary he had missed from February to April 1971. He was told, however, that the only way he could continue to work as a guerrilla team leader was capturing NVA soldiers on a C.O.D. basis. [redacted] pleaded and wheedled but could do no better and accepted. It was on his second mission that he achieved one of the more imaginative abductions.

Team Tomato was operating near a village about eight kilometers south of Saravane, employing a net of informants who were seeking vulnerable NVA soldiers. On 4 July 1971 an informant reported to [redacted] that four NVA soldiers had arrived in their village to buy buffaloes. Two soldiers had gone out of the village on the buying mission, while two soldiers were staying in the village chief's house. The informants reported that these two were lax in their personal security and could be taken. The two NVA soldiers were Pfc. [redacted] and Pfc. [redacted] of the Production and the Logistic Companies of Binh Tram 38, a major logistical unit of the Ho Chi Minh Trail complex.

A Bridal Party

[redacted] with five team members, six informants, and [redacted] the daughter of one of the informants, rounded up pigs, chickens, and lao-lao and headed for the village to announce that [redacted] and [redacted] wanted to be married. It is a Lao custom that weddings be conducted at the village chief's house and that there be a feast and drinking before and after the wedding. [redacted] plan was to pack the village chief's house with his men and then jump the two NVA soldiers. The ruse worked. After beginning the pre-wedding festivities, [redacted] invited the two soldiers to join the party.

One soldier, Pfc. [redacted] spoke Lao and was happy to join in, while Pfc. [redacted] who spoke no Lao sat warily by, AK-47 rifle across his lap, not participating. They had a pre-arranged signal that if [redacted] poured whiskey for the soldiers three times, the third pouring would be the signal to grab the soldiers. As the team leader poured the third drink for Pfc. [redacted] the deputy team leader slammed Pfc. [redacted] rifle to the ground and kicked it away while [redacted] seized Pfc. [redacted]. The team quickly tied up the two prisoners, cautioned the bewildered village chief to maintain silence over what happened, and left the hut, the bride, and the village.

Unfortunately for [redacted] his propensity for thievery did him in. He had kept for himself a large part of the \$2,400 he received for the four prisoners, and paid his informants piddling amounts for their help. They were so dissatisfied that when he appeared near their village for his third try, the informants turned him in to the NVA authorities. He was last seen being led eastward toward an NVA prison camp.

The Cash on Delivery program, from the first successful defection in November 1970 through January 1972, provided nine NVA prisoners or defectors. During this same 15-month period another case officer, encouraged by the successes, organized his own similar program and contributed six more prisoners. A successor case officer subsequently obtained eight more NVA soldiers through guerrilla intelligence teams.

Teams Lime and Cranberry had indeed initiated a useful program for providing a continuing supply of NVA human intelligence resources.