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Laos: Little Planes Carry a Big Effort

By TOM WICKER

THONG KHEUNG, Laos—The tiny single-engine Helio-courier spiraled down through the blue haze of smoke that hangs over the Laotian Mountains at this time of year. Losing altitude at 1,000 feet per minute, it circled tightly into a narrow valley between rock-topped mountain ridges, then flattened into a final brief glide.

The landing strip ahead was shorter than a football field and little more than a bullock pasture with the bigger rocks and logs scraped away. The American pilot brought the Helio-courier down on this unlikely patch of terrain without a bump, worked quick miracles with engine, brakes and flaps, and brought his plane to a stop just short of the brush.

A Wandering Reporter

This time he had brought only a United States Information Service officer and a wandering reporter to the villagers of Thong Kheung. Usually, the pilots who fly over these hills and valleys for Air American in their Helio-couriers and Pilatus Porters are more helpful.

They bring nails, extra rice,

cornmeal, medical supplies and bars of iron for the village smithy (who made his own bellows from a bamboo log) from the American aid program, and blankets, knives, cooking utensils, leaflets and pictures of the king, and even classroom blackboards from the Royal Laotian Government.

Refugee Village

For Thong Kheung is a refugee village for Lao, Thaidam and Lao Theung tribesmen fleeing south from the North Vietnamese who have invaded the northern provinces. Less than a year ago this village of 2,000 souls did not exist. Now its people are housed, an elementary school is going for its 290 children, the available paddy land has been planted to rice and much of the hillside timber has been stripped away for fields of upland dry rice.

Thong Kheung is no paradise and the local Meo tribesmen are making trouble. They claim the land in the area and want no more rice fields cleared on the slopes. But the village, huddled beneath the magnificent crags and peaks of this country's endless mountains, is a lot better than wandering the roads, going hungry and brav-

ing the nighttime cold without a roof.

The village would scarcely be possible if it were not for Air American, its remarkable short take-off and landing planes, and the primitive airstrip on which bullocks graze. It is three days' walk to the nearest town of any size and the dashing little aircraft with their loads of American and Laotian necessities are the only means of outside supply.

Not far away, as a Helio-courier flies, is an even shorter and rougher airstrip known as Site 204. Undulating over a few mounds and partially up a slope, it is supposed to be 270 feet long, but looks considerably shorter as one tries to keep it in sight from a swiftly descending Pilatus Porter (a bigger plane than the Helio-courier but capable of equally astonishing landings and take-offs).

Plain of Jars Perimeter

In the timbered hills around Site 204 a band of 200 Royal Laotian troops maintains part of the battle perimeter around the Plain of Jars. This crossroads plateau in the heart of Laos is in the hands of North Vietnamese troops and their laggard puppets, the Pathet Lao. But Government troops

have the plain loosely surrounded and have halted further southward and westward penetration.

The royal soldiers, a particularly well-led unit, have fought off several recent probing attacks from the plain. But they probably could not maintain their string of wilderness outposts along a fifteen-kilometer ridgeline if it were not for the supplies airlifted into Site 204 by the Helios and Porters.

'Enemy Country'

"Enemy country" in Laos is pockmarked with Government enclaves and territory and the little planes range far into North Vietnamese-held areas, landing at impossible sites to resupply holdout villages, schools, dispensaries and troops. Soon they will even bring in English textbooks to officers at Site 204 who want to improve their spare time.

All this is more than an adventure yarn about daring American pilots and ingenious American planes. It is a good lesson in how to support a war and help a people without sending 400,000 troops, without laying waste a countryside and without arousing worldwide political controversy.

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