

CIA Reported Inside China

By MICHAEL MORROW

VIENTIANE, Laos, Jan. 16—United States intelligence operations apparently include the sending of armed reconnaissance teams into China from northern Laos.

Teams are reported to have gone as far as 200 miles into China, dispatched from a secret Central Intelligence Agency outpost 15 minutes flying time north of the Laotian opium center of Houei Sai.

Western diplomatic sources in Vientiane and sources close to the Central Intelligence Agency say the CIA is sending hill tribesmen armed with American weapons, a special three-pound radio with a range of 400 miles and other special equipment to tap Chinese telegraph lines, watch roads and do other types of intelligence gathering. "There is always a team in China," say sources close to the CIA.

Staging area for the operation is a small mountain valley airstrip called Nam Lieu (also known as Nam Yu). The strip, which one Air America pilot describes as "difficult as hell to get into," is surrounded by mountains. It is serviced by Air America and Continental Air Service and is a way-station for opium traders plying the opium road out of northern Laos and Burma to opium and heroin factories at Houei Sai.

The CIA makes no objection to the opium trade because it is the basis of the hill tribes' economy and also because high personages in the royal Lao government reportedly are involved.)

Flown to Airstrip

Teams usually are flown to a sod airstrip known as Site 93 or Moung Moun about 20 kilometers north of Nam Lieu, near the Mekong River on the border with Burma.

On occasion teams are put down on the banks of the Mekong by helicopter. They carry inflatable rubber rafts to use in crossing the Mekong into Burma. From there they continue northwest, entering China about 50 kilometers from Site 93.

Teams are gone three to four months, maintaining radio contact with Nam Lieu and with airplanes that fly close to the China border to pick up their broadcasts.

On at least one occasion an airplane that strayed into China was nearly shot down. In 1968, an Air America Porter single-engine plane with two aboard crossed the Chinese frontier near the borders of Burma, Laos and China. Parts of both wings were blown away by anti-aircraft fire but the plane was able to limp back to base.

Most hill tribesmen used in the China operation belong to the Yao tribe. Yao are used because this tribe lives in large numbers along the mountainous frontier of Laos, Burma, Thailand and China. There are about 2,000,000 Yao living in China, and some of the guerrillas have family connections there.

Meo and Lao Theung tribesmen are used for similar reasons. Several of the teams have been captured by the Chinese, and some have switched allegiances, returning to Nam Lieu as counterespies.

Five Defected

In 1968, five Chinese caught up in the purges of the cultural revolution defected to a Nam Lieu reconnaissance team. They were treated well by the Americans for a time but, eventually were turned over to the royal Laotian government. According to sources close to the CIA, the five were thrown into a 12-by-12-foot pit, exposed to the elements. They were left there for a time and eventually executed.

Like most CIA operations in Laos, the one out of Nam Lieu is directed from a headquarters at Udorn air base in northeastern Thailand. There are several Americans at Nam Lieu, however, including CIA and military intelligence personnel. Sources close to the CIA report the number has been increased recently to more than 10 from four.

In addition to activities inside China, the Americans at Nam Lieu help to direct a joint operation of SGU (special guerrilla units) and the Thai army at Xieng Lom south of Houei Sai on the Lao-Thai border.

They run intelligence-gathering missions on a road being built by the Chinese government (under an agreement reached with the now defunct coalition government of Laos) in the same vicinity.

Until mid-September 1970, the Nam Lieu operation was headed by a rough-and-tumble veteran guerrilla organizer named Anthony Poe. Poe is a legendary figure in Laos known best for his dislike of journalists, disregard for orders and radio codes, capacity for Lao whisky and expertise at clandestine guerrilla operations.

Poe was removed after a Sept. 3, 1970, article by Dispatch News Service International on the Nam Lieu operations, ostensibly because the article "blew his cover."

According to sources close to the CIA, however, this was an excuse used by the American Embassy here to get rid of Poe, whose mountaineer style had been a source of long-term friction with members of the American mission in Laos, including Ambassador McMurtrie Godley.

Mr. Watten PW
Mr. Coffey
This predicted the Washington Post by 12 days.
Agents Shifted

The September story was a major concern of CIA director Richard Helms when he visited Laos in the fall. Helms was upset that there might be a leak within the CIA in Laos, sources close to the CIA report.

Whether by design or coincidence, Vince Shields, in charge of CIA operation at Long Cheng on the edge of the Plain of Jars north of Vientiane, and Patrick Devlin, station chief for the CIA in Vientiane, have been rotated.

As for the missions into China, however, sources close to the CIA and Western diplomatic sources report that, to their knowledge, they continue.

Since leaving Nam Lieu, Poe has spent most of his time at Udorn air base, although one source reports Poe continues to do odd jobs on the Thai-Cambodian border. Those who know him say he is unhappy out of Nam Lieu.

Poe is an ex-marine noncommissioned officer, wounded in landing at Iwo Jima, who remained in Asia after World War II. In the 1950s he helped organize CIA-trained Tibetan insurgents, escorting them to Colorado for training and finally going with them into Tibet.

Later he worked in the Thai-Cambodian border area with the Khmer Serei, anti-Sihanouk guerrillas, receiving assistance from the CIA, and in other parts of Thailand. He has been in and out of Laos since before the Geneva accords of 1962 and was one of the first Americans involved in arming and training paramilitary groups in Laos.

Poe is known as stubborn and brusque, sometimes going into fits of anger over the radio, his lifeline with the outside world. He is said to prefer working with hill tribes to working with Americans and looks down on most American operations because of their heavy reliance on American personnel.

He has been wounded at least once in his career in Laos, and the Pathet Lao are reported to have put a price on his head. He is perhaps the only American legally married to a woman of the hill tribes.

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