

Mr. Worfield

an am. comes  
off family well but  
the Agency does not  
do so well.

B

13 June 66

APPROVED FOR  
RELEASE DATE:  
29-Apr-2009

## Laos Buzzes With Planes and Intrigue

By HARRISON E. SALISBURY  
Special to The New York Times

VIENTIANE, Laos, June 10  
—On the airfield at Vientiane, the late afternoon sun beats dazingly on three all-white helicopters bearing the initials of the International Control Commission, whose mission is keeping the peace in this remote kingdom.

At the far edge of the field a flight of five chubby bombers takes off like buzzing bees. "Going out for the late afternoon bombing," a watcher explains.

Nearer the small modern air terminal is parked a sturdy old DC-3 painted a rather gaudy green and bearing an exotic name in Laotian. "What kind of an airline is that?" a traveler idly asks. A spectator laughs. "Oh, that's a local

line," he says. "Sometimes we call it 'Air Opium.'"

Within the airport terminal there's a hubbub in the second floor lounge. At a table in the center a beefy American is pulling Heidsieck champagne bottles from a big PX shopping bag. He untwists the wire from a cork and aims the bottle in the direction of a Laotian bar girl. The cork hits the ceiling with a resound smack as the jolly crowd cheers.

"It's a going-away party for some U. S. aid personnel," a Vientiane resident explains. The American group—mostly jowly characters with bright sports shirts, dark glasses and wives whose Thai silk dresses are stretched tight across shoulders and hips—is mixed with a group of non-Laotian

Asians. "Those are T.C.N.," a resident explains. "They are third-country nationals."

It develops that the United States foreign-aid people hire large numbers of so-called T.C.N. to "deal with Laotians" and for supervisory and other lesser chores.

The Laotians are described as bitterly resentful, complaining that the Americans have no notion what T.C.N. people do—whether efficient, whether grafting, whether establishing good relations with Laotians or not.

Laotians also complain that there is no way for most American aid personnel to know whether their programs are welcome or not since the Americans have little

direct contact with Laotians.

In another corner of the airport-lounge, there is another farewell party. An American pilot is seeing a woman off to Bangkok. The pudgy flier is one of many pilots for Air America which, with Continental Airlines, is carrying out a multitude of missions in the Laotian backcountry. Air America has been called the Central Intelligence Agency's private air subsidiary.

What is Air America doing in Laos? Probably no one person in or out of the United States could name all that its doing. One big mission is supplying and supporting the so-called air projects that spatter the map of Laos like a bad case of chickenpox. There are night drops and day landings at more than 150 "U.S. aid" projects.

These are projects that seem to require radio transmitters, occasional bundles of guns and possibly bags of gold. The mission? It is said that this develops islands of "friendly," or little groups of the local populace who supposedly can be counted on to fight back against the Communists. "Friendlys" are encouraged and created with presumably judicious supplies of guns, ammunition and funds. They are supposed to set up informer networks and keep an eye on goings-on in the back country.

#### Pilots Often Shot At

There's plenty going on in the back country. The work of Air America pilots is not milk-run stuff. Often they are fired on as they come in low and there is never any knowing who is firing. Up in the northwest frontier near the borders of Laos, Thailand, Burma and China—the great confrontation between East and West is very, very distant, but there are dozens of local feuds and conflicts constantly in progress.

It is hard for Air America pilots flying through mountainous areas, particularly in the dry season when farmers are busy burning off mountains. But the pilots are compensated well—\$3,000 a month.

Still, Vientiane is not home and more than one flier fails to serve out the three-year contract.

But all this pales before the real interest in this corner of world—opium. A significant portion of the world's opium traffic originates in the northwest quadrangle. This is where poppies are grown and raw opium is produced.

#### Some Opium Dens Closed

Opium smoking is perfectly legal in Laos, although downtown of Vientiane dens have been officially closed. Except, perhaps in a grimy block that Vientiane calls its "strip" in admiration of the more famous namesake in Las Vegas, Nev. War has helped the opium business in part, hindered it perhaps more.

Neither North Vietnam nor South Vietnam has any set of recognition signals for "Air Opium" planes. So increasingly, instead of risking flying semi-processed brown opium to Bangkok, Hong Kong, Saigon or Singapore, operators are pro-



The New York Times June 13, 1966  
**Vientiane (cross), capital of Laos, hums with U.S. aid activity as well as busy traffic in opium and gold.**

cessing it into heroin, which is much more compact. Some bright-eyed citizens in Laos insist they can take you right to two recently opened heroin-processing plants.

There are skeptics who feel that several recipients of the bounty of United States foreign aid and of the C.I.A. may have a deeper interest in the opium business than the Communist business.

Right in the center of the whole trade is a hardy band of Chinese Nationalist troops who were flown to the border of China's Yunnan Province years ago in one of more spectacular early C.I.A. operations. After being abandoned officially by both the United States and Taiwan, the troops have dug themselves into the heart of the opium area. With their own barracks, defense lines, airstrips and helicopter landing spots, they have managed to turn a pretty penny in poppies.

There's another serious pre-

occupation in this curious kingdom: gold. Gold in the form of bars, jewelry or coins—no one is too particular about the form. Diamonds are interesting as well. Vientiane is probably the most out-of-the-way capital in Asia. But each month two to four tons of gold flows through the central bank—all in transit.

Where does the gold come from? Laotian bankers don't ask. Where does it go? They shrug their shoulders—Saigon, Singapore, Bangkok, Hong Kong, possibly New York.

Why does it come? "That's a very interesting question," one fiscal expert said. "There seems to be a definite benefit to some people to have gold pass through Vientiane. There are different kinds of trades. Maybe they buy diamonds in Hong Kong. Trade them for gold in Saigon. Send gold to Vientiane. Could it be traded for opium and then gold delivered to Singapore? We never ask that question."

Not many people ask questions in Vientiane. Mostly they seem to think it's better not to know just what's going on.

Meanwhile, war goes on all around. And in Laos itself. But the little mountain kingdom still preserves what is technically called neutrality. And white helicopters of the International Control Commission, dazzling in the late afternoon sun as bombers take off for distant missions, are there to prove it.

NEW YORK TIMES  
13 June 1966