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Facts Surface on the Heroin War

By Flora Lewis

AT LAST the facts of the heroin war in Indochina are trickling out. Many officials, and others, have been aware of them for a long time. But the officials weren't very interested, and secrecy about the war in Laos and American clandestine operations made it extra hard for others' to pinpoint the route of heroin from the mountaintop poppy fields of Southeast Asia to American blood-streams.

The CIA, which has prime responsibility for the Laotian war, long denied any knowledge of the drug traffic. Now it has provided Congress, through the Bureau of Narcotics, with a report naming the sites of heroin refineries in Burma, Thailand and Laos. Further, the public report says that "a senior Laotian officer may hold an ownership interest in some of these facilities." The officer, named elsewhere, is Gen. Ouane Rathkone, chief of staff of the Laotian army, which exists entirely on U.S. subsidy. Army units provide a "military defense perimeter" to guard the refineries.

The report also confirms for the first time on the record that Laotian air force planes and Laotian and South Vietnamese commercial planes take the drugs on to markets, both the GI market in South Vietnam and international centers which ship to Europe and the United States. It does not mention Air America, the CIA-operated airline in Laos and Vietnam. But there have long been numerous reports that Air America's secret flights supporting the Laotian war also often transport opium.

Rep. Robert Steele of Connecticut, an ex-CIA man himself, has named Maj. Gen. Ngo Dzu who commands South Vietnam's Second Military region as one large-scale organizer of the traffic.

THE opium, from which heroin is refined, is grown chiefly by Meo tribesmen who live in what is called the "golden triangle" area of western Burma, northern Thailand and Laos. The CIA organized the Meo of Laos into the Armee Clandestine and has accepted responsibility for large numbers of them.

Although it normally denied having any awareness or interest in the drug trade, from time to time the CIA claimed progress in persuading the Meo under its influence to switch to food crops. Its own report now says that "in areas (in Laos) where the tribesmen have been encouraged to grow corn, the poppies are planted among the corn. When the corn is cut the poppies continue to grow until they too can be harvested."

Vice Adm. William C. Mack, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower,

has testified that the only thing that "will save our men" from the tremendous drug problem in Vietnam is troop withdrawal. But the supply routes are organized now. The high-ranking officials, and by no means all the highest have as yet been named, still have U.S. support and every prospect that support will continue after most troops have gone. So the heroin can be expected to follow the GIs home, a continuing souvenir of the war.

TWO developments have begun to bring into the open the relation of heroin and the war. One is the huge increase in GI use in the past two years, while the military were assiduously fighting marijuana and virtually ignoring the opium-heroin trade. The other is mounting public revulsion as each piece of news appears here.

But the situation isn't very new. Capt. Robert Marasco, the former Green Beret who was accused of killing a double agent, tells of camping on the Cambodian border in the Parrot's Beak sector in 1969. "There was a big market field there; people went back and forth as though there were no border. The price of heroin was astonishing; for \$25 you could get what sells for \$500,000 in the United States," he told me. "It was being bought by South Vietnamese soldiers, obviously flunkies for the higher-ups."

On another occasion, he trailed 30 pounds of pure opium brought down the Ho Chi Minh Trail by Pathet Lao Communists along with medical supplies and found they were sold to South Vietnamese military and sent on to Saigon. "I didn't pay much attention," Marasco says; "that wasn't our concern."

It is time, late but not too late, for American intelligence which does know quite a lot about the drug traffic to make it their concern. It is time to stop defoliating Vietnamese fields and start defoliating poppy fields. It is time to stop subsidizing high Asian officials who use American support to deal in drugs with impunity.

John Ingersoll, director of the Bureau of Narcotics, has written Congress that "It is probable that opium production in Southeast Asia will be brought under effective control only with further political development in these countries."

If that means that the United States can't successfully fight heroin and Vietnamese Communists at the same time because too many allies are on the side of heroin, it shouldn't be hard to choose the worst enemy. There can be no national defense even on this continent if the invasion of drugs is not stopped.

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