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In Laos:**THE FINAL AMERICAN PULL-BACK BEGINS**

Long Cheng

Now that a flimsy cease-fire is taking hold in Laos, the U. S. Central Intelligence Agency is pulling out of the so-called secret war.

The move marks the end of an era in this poor, sparsely populated nation that became a battleground only because it borders both North and South Vietnam as well as Cambodia, China, Thailand and Burma.

For more than a decade, CIA agents armed, trained and directed Meo tribesmen, led by General Vang Pao, against North Vietnamese and Communist Pathet Lao on the Plain of Jars in Northern Laos. Under the Americans, the Meo became the Government's most effective fighting force.

American casualties. CIA "case officers" often were in the thick of battle, and a number have been killed in action, including perhaps a half dozen in the past year.

Casualties also have occurred among U. S. civilian pilots flying helicopters and fixed-wing airplanes, generally for Air America, sometimes called the "CIA airline."

But the Vietnam "truce" also signaled a cease-fire in Laos. Vang Pao's tribesmen were absorbed into the regular Army shortly before the Laos cease-fire was signed on Feb-



—Wide World Photo

Vang Pao. His "clandestine army" is no longer a direct arm of CIA.

ruary 21, and CIA advisers—most of them former servicemen hired to serve in Laos—began heading for home. Officials in Vientiane, the capital, say most CIA members will be gone within a few months, although some operatives will remain.

The idea of a U. S.-directed "clandestine army" in Laos emerged as early as 1959. Under terms of the 1954 Geneva Agreements that ended France's war with the Vietnamese Communists, only France could keep military advisers in Laos.

To circumvent this restriction, the U. S. had a group of soldiers resign from the Army and accept jobs with the Civilian Evaluation Office, then part of the Agency for International Development pro-

gram in Laos. The CIA moved into the picture in the early 1960s, and its military role expanded steadily as attacks by the Communists grew in intensity.

Full house. Vang Pao, a peppy Meo who is said to have six wives and about 30 children, was chosen by the CIA in 1961 to command irregular forces. He still appears to be firmly in charge here at his headquarters on the southwestern edge of the Plain of Jars. But there is some doubt as to how many of the 10,400 Meo he claims to command actually will remain with him.

The tribesmen were paid regularly by the CIA and received extra "hazard" pay for each day they were in battle. As part of the regular Royal Lao Army, they not only will lose the combat bonus, but they fear that corrupt unit commanders will embezzle their monthly wages.

Loyalty of the Meo is important militarily to Vang Pao because the 4,000 troops from Thailand who had been under his command presumably will be withdrawn under terms of the cease-fire agreement.

Vang Pao realizes that with the CIA leaving, he will have to turn elsewhere for outside help to enable his Meo people to re-establish lives disrupted by years of war. What the Meo need most now, he says, is not military aid from the CIA, but economic assistance—from the U. S. Agency for International Development.

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In Cambodia:

U. S. GETS STILL MORE ENTANGLED

PNOMPENH

Here at the scene, it is clearly evident that the U. S. is far more deeply involved in the Cambodian war than most people at home realize.

All American military activities here, including daily air strikes by U. S. warplanes based in neighboring Thailand, are directed from a "control center" in Pnompenh—the American Embassy.

The military "commander," in effect, is U. S. Ambassador Emory Swank.

The Ambassador approves bombing attacks against Communist forces—more than 200 each day—as a matter of routine, relying on recommendations from American military officers assigned to the Embassy. Officially, the air attacks are made at the request of the Cambodian Government.

The U. S. Congress, in a foreign-aid-authorization bill that became law in January, 1971, barred U. S. combat troops or military advisers from Cambodia. American officers, deciding which targets should be bombed, avoid any appearance of involvement in combat.

The MEDT. Cambodian military intelligence—an organization that in the past has proved to be of dubious capability—provides



—UPI Photo

Emory Swank. A diplomat controls U. S. bombing attacks in Cambodia.

some combat data to the Embassy. But the major source of information is the U. S. Military Equipment Delivery Team, commanded by Brig. Gen. John Cleland.

Although the team's assigned task is to supervise delivery of American military equipment to the Cambodian armed forces, members on occasion actually go into the battle zones with the Cambodian troops. Americans are legally forbidden to give military advice, but a knowledgeable source in Pnompenh says:

"There is no doubt that the MEDT is offering counsel to the Cambodians on tactical operations. Advice would have to be given in order to co-ordinate American air attacks with Cambodian operations on the ground."

By the second week in April, the military situation in Cambodia appeared to be worsening, and there was a definite "up tight" atmosphere at the U. S. Embassy.

A number of foreign countries, including Russia, Britain, Japan, Australia and Israel, evacuated dependents of their embassy employees. At least one American wife also left, but those with children had departed by last October.

U. S. Embassy officials insisted that the latest evacuation had nothing to do with a threatened Communist assault on the city. It was made, they said, only because the capital's "discomfort index" was high. A Communist blockade of all major highways and the Mekong River supply line had resulted in severe fuel shortages, power blackouts and a shrinking water supply.

Under heavy U. S. air cover, a truck convoy loaded with necessities arrived in Pnompenh April 11 from the southern port of Kompong Som, and eight of 19 ships successfully ran a gantlet of Communist fire on the Mekong River. American planes were flying in emergency supplies of fuel. But severe shortages remained.

Despite the discouraging outlook, there was no panic among Cambodians or foreigners in Pnompenh. One reason may have been the feeling that the U. S.—more deeply involved here than it was in South Vietnam a decade ago—seemed to be standing firm.