

PLAIN  
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## THE CIA'S QUIET LITTLE WAR IN LAOS, OR TONS OF BOMBS AMONG FRIENDS? By FRED BRANFMAN

*Fred Branfman, 53-year-old codirector of the Indochina Resource Center in Washington, D.C., has lived for four and a half years in Indochina, three and a half of them in Laos as a researcher and writer and as an educational advisor with International Voluntary Services. A graduate of the University of Chicago with a master's degree in education from Harvard, Branfman speaks Laotian, French, Swahili, Hebrew and some Thai and is married to a Vietnamese. The following article will form part of "CIA: The President's Secret Army," a book based on his research into America's clandestine war efforts in Laos.*

The current controversy over the CIA has concentrated on activities conducted by a relatively small number of people, ranging from the bugging of Soviet embassies to an occasional assassination attempt. But the CIA actually functioned as a major war-making body, spending unreported billions of dollars directing a military force of more than 100,000 Americans and Asians and dropping over 2,000,000 tons of bombs—as much tonnage as was absorbed by all of Europe and the Pacific theater during World War Two—on the tiny country of Laos.

To hear some officials describe the CIA men in Laos, one would think them a few dozen miracle men combining the qualities of Tom Dooley and Frank Merriwell to help the 30,000 guerrillas with whom they communicate in flawless native dialect. A strikingly different picture emerges from interviews with sources who know these CIA operators.

People are still talking about the exploits of one legendary CIA man in Laos. This guy, they say, offered a bounty for enemy ears—which could be deposited in a big plastic bag hanging on his porch—until his "boys" got carried away and lopped off so many ears he had to discontinue the practice. Probably the most famous story recalls the time he gave a box to a pilot, asking him to deliver it to Pat Landry, his CIA boss at Udorn Air Force Base in Thailand. During the flight, the pilot noticed a progressively worsening odor, which he finally traced to the box. He tore it open—to find inside a fresh human head. The joke was to imagine Landry's reaction on opening the box. "I mean," said one source, collapsing with laughter, "what do you do with a human head? You can't just throw it in the wastepaper basket."

Four key organizations played a central role in the CIA's secret army

structure. They were Air America, an airline owned and directly controlled by the CIA; Continental Air Services, Inc., which as Continental Airlines in the United States is a commercial firm but operated entirely separately in Laos; the U.S. Agency for International Development's Requirements Office; and the Air Force's 56th Special Operations Wing.

AA and Continental, or CASI, provided military air-transport service that, among other things, enabled the CIA's troops to carry out offensives during the rainy season, when Pathet Lao forces were mired down in mud. Air America and CASI drops of rice and armaments, too, were often what kept the Meo and Lao Theung hill

*"If there's any one question posed by the CIA's behavior in Laos and elsewhere, it's that the CIA may have reached the point where it has itself become a threat to our national security."*

tribes, the Thai mercenaries and Lao conscripts of the CIA's army fighting. For the hill people, these rice drops were the only means of survival, since they had been uprooted from their homes as many as four or five times.

The Requirements Office, one of the most powerful organizations in Laos, was established to receive and distribute all military goods coming into the country. CIA logistical control of the war through this office meant that those Laotian generals who cooperated with the CIA would get U.S. weapons; those who didn't wouldn't. The reason the office was given a USAID cover was, once again, part of the over-all attempt to keep the CIA secret army from public view. The lid was somewhat blown in 1970, when then-USAID director John Hannah took the unprecedented step of complaining publicly that the CIA was using his agency as a cover.

The 56th Special Operations Wing, a fleet of propeller-driven aircraft headquartered in Thailand, was first brought into the Laotian conflict as a means of carrying out extensive bombing raids by American, Lao and Thai pilots; later, it was used to support the many irregular activities of the Air Force's Blue Berets, the most publicized of which was the raid on Son Tay

well remain in direct control of the 56th SOW today.

In the first year after the July 1962 Geneva Accords, which prohibited foreign military advisory personnel in Laos, the CIA ran the war almost entirely through its own personnel, plus the aforementioned AA, CASI, 56th SOW and USAID Requirements Office. Soon, however, as the war effort grew, the CIA found itself having to utilize ever-increasing numbers of Americans from other groups.

First of all, there were active-duty U.S. military personnel, working in Laos out of uniform, to give the appearance that the Geneva Accords were being observed. Many of the men of the Air Force's clandestine unit known as Project 404 lived and worked in Laos but were officially registered as residing in Thailand. There was even a daily Udorn-Laos commuter flight, carrying 20 to 30 Air Force mechanics and weapons technicians in and out, morning and night. On any given day, there were many other U.S. active-duty personnel in Laos on TDY—temporary duty assignment. One such was Bob Anderson, who in 1967-1968 was an Air Force ordnance expert who was frequently sent in to Laos from Thailand for such tasks as defusing unexploded U.S. bombs that had been dropped on friendly villages. Anderson remembers he'd be given \$100 to buy civilian clothing and issued a USAID employee's card for his visits to Laos. There were also several thousand Green Berets on active duty in various secret enterprises from time to time. The Pentagon recently declassified a series of operations that went into southern Laos for missions involving everything from espionage to kidnappings and murder between 1965 and 1972. Although nominally under orders from the Pentagon, they were, in fact, controlled by the CIA out of Saigon. And finally, of course, any listing of U.S. military personnel actively involved in the war in Laos must include the hundreds of U.S. Air Force, Navy and Marine airmen who flew the 400 jet sorties and 15 B-52 raids that took place over Laos on a typical day in 1971, for example. It is, of course,