

Recalling a CIA Officer's Sacrifice

John Kearns and the Cold War in Laos (S)

Kenneth Michael Absher

Editor's Note: This article brings to life the story of one of CIA's silent heroes, honored by a Star on the Memorial Wall. (U)

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John Kearns served two tours in Laos as a CIA paramilitary (PM) officer during the war in Indochina. By the end of 1972, Agency officers in Laos were guiding and (b)(1) supporting 40,000 (b)(3)(c) Laotian (b)(3)(c) regular troops in operations that (b)(3)(n) d down elements of at least four (b)(3)(n) divisions of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA), preventing them from joining the war against the South Vietnamese government and allied US forces. In direct support of US foreign policy, these CIA officers confronted intense combat with the NVA on an almost daily basis. While this article focuses on Kearns, who was killed in December 1972, it is a tribute to the courage and dedication of all CIA personnel and their families who served their country during the war in Indochina. It also reminds us that today's PM officers are the guardians of a legacy of courage, sacrifice, and honor bequeathed by those who served before.¹ (S)

Born in 1942, John Wesley Kearns III grew up in Texas and joined the US Army Special Forces out of high school. Like many young men in his generation, he was posted to Vietnam, where he earned the Combat Infantryman's Badge for

coming under enemy fire. He returned home in 1965 and completed a degree in geography and economics at North Texas State University. Upon graduation, Kearns joined the CIA on contract as a PM officer. After ten months of intensive training, he was assigned to Vientiane Station, Laos, as a PM contract operations officer in June 1969. (S)

The Strategic Chessboard (U)

Following World War II, as anti-colonial winds began to blow through much of the underdeveloped world and Mao Tse-tung drove Chung Kai-shek and the Nationalists out of mainland China, communist-inspired Vietminh guerrillas in Indochina began to agitate for independence from France. Determined to keep Indochina out of communist hands, President Truman provided financial and logistical support to the French in Southeast Asia.² (U)

The Geneva Accords of July 1954 attempted to resolve the Indochina conflict by calling for the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Vietnam was partitioned along the 17th parallel, leaving the Vietminh in *de facto* control of the north. Although not an official participant in Geneva, the United States warned that “it would view any renewal of aggression in violation

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¹ This article is based on research in CIA personnel files, review of daily combat intelligence reports from Laos, and interviews with 12 people knowledgeable about John Kearns's career and Agency activities in Laos in the late 1960s and early 1970s. (S)

² For this and subsequent references to the origin and evolution of the Vietnam conflict, see Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1994). (U)

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As time went on, the Agency found itself guiding and supporting 40,000 irregular troops, about half of whom were tribesmen from northern Laos.

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of the aforesaid arrangements with grave concern and as seriously threatening international peace and security.” In response to the opportunity for repatriation allowed under the Geneva Accords, some 80,000 to 100,000 communist sympathizers moved north, while one million North Vietnamese fled south.³ (U)

North Vietnam launched a guerrilla war against South Vietnam in 1959, infiltrating men and supplies via Laos and Cambodia. Over 6,000 North Vietnamese troops moved into Laos to protect the logistics routes into South Vietnam and to support the communist Pathet Lao, waging a guerrilla war against the non-communist government in Vientiane. (U)

Inheriting the policy positions of his predecessors, President Kennedy judged Indochina to be the decisive battleground that would determine whether communist-led guerrilla wars could be stopped and the Cold War won. At a press conference on 23 March 1961, Kennedy warned: “The security of all Southeast Asia will be endangered if Laos loses its neutral independence. Its own safety runs with the safety of us all—in a real neutrality observed by all.”⁴ (U)

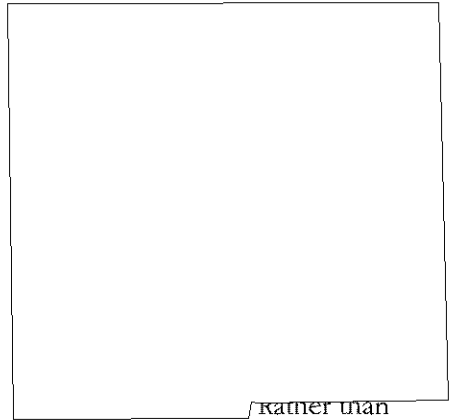
The CIA in Laos (S)

According to Ted Shackley, who was Chief of Station (COS) in Laos from 1966-1968, the CIA began its involvement on the ground in Laos in January 1961 with the recruitment of a force of 1,000 irregulars, mostly Meo (Hmong) tribesmen. By March, the force had grown to

4,000. As time went on, the Agency found itself guiding and supporting 40,000 irregular troops, about half of whom were tribesmen from northern Laos. From 1963 to 1966, after the communist Pathet Lao pulled out of a coalition government in Vientiane, CIA efforts in Laos focused on the northern provinces. US policy required that the Agency-led irregulars control enough of the population centers and land in northern Laos to allow the Royal Lao Government to negotiate with the Pathet Lao from a position of strength. The war in the north was a war of position and maneuver—ebb and flow. The non-communist side was best in the rainy season; the Pathet Lao and its backers, the NVA, were better in the dry season. The CIA-led irregulars fought hard enough during the early 1960s to keep elements of two NVA divisions tied down in the north. (S)

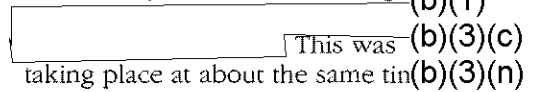
In 1965, the CIA received approval to open a second front. The war in the north was to continue, but action was to be stepped up in southern Laos to contribute more directly to the war in South Vietnam. The irregulars were to be used to impede NVA movement through the panhandle of Laos to supply and reinforce the communist Vietcong guerrillas in South Vietnam. The irregulars were to collect intelligence on the materiel that Hanoi was transporting through the

panhandle, destroy it when possible, and pin down NVA troops in the area to keep them from moving into South Vietnam. (S)



rather than being assigned to particular units, CIA case officers in Laos were responsible for specific sectors—they went wherever action occurred in their sector. (S)

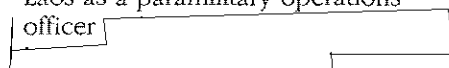
In 1970, the Department of Defense began to spend funds directly in support of CIA operations in Laos. John Eisenhower, who worked in the policy office of the Secretary of Defense from 1969 to 1971, recalls money being transferred overtly and directly from the DoD budget (b)(1)



This was (b)(3)(c) taking place at about the same time (b)(3)(n) as the overall drawdown of US forces in Vietnam. Illustrating the pivotal role that Laos continued to play in Southeast Asia, a note seen by a CIA officer in 1971 carried the declaration, “Long Tieng [in northern Laos] must not fall.” It was initialed by President Nixon. (S)

Kearns's First Tour (U)

John Kearns spent his first year in Laos as a paramilitary operations officer



³ Kissinger, p. 636. (U)
⁴ As quoted in Kissinger, p. 646. (U)

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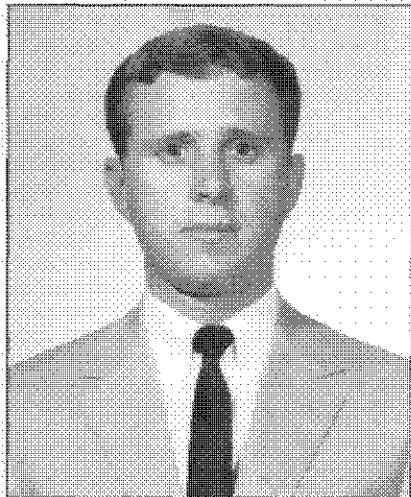


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Kearns sent action teams against North Vietnamese installations deep in enemy-held territory.



John Wesley Kearns III, CIA file photo. (S)

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In this capacity, he was deeply involved in high-priority special operations to send action teams against North Vietnamese installations deep in enemy-held territory. He oversaw all phases of these operations—planning, training, team leadership and motivation, command and control, and post-mission debriefing and analysis. According to his supervisor, he was decisive in his leadership and command functions, and directed his Laotian assets with quiet self-confidence. (S)

Back to Langley (U)

Kearns was selected for lateral entry into the Clandestine Service Career Staff on 3 October 1971. He returned to CIA headquarters

he completed the basic clandestine operations course. Most weekends, he drove to Dallas see his fiancé, whom he had met at North Texas State University. John had insisted that Kathy receive her own degree before they were married. She received her BA in History and English in December 1971, and they were married in Dallas on Christmas Eve. (S)

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(b)(6)

In August 1972, Kearns and his new wife were posted back to Laos. Initially, he was assigned to Long Tieng in northern Laos as an operations officer. Another officer was already in the Commando/Raider slot, however, relegating Kearns to being the assistant to someone holding the position he had formerly held himself. He sought another job and

He was immediately caught up in Agency efforts to counter the extensive offensive yet undertaken by the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong. (S)

The Easter Offensive (U)

On 30 March 1972, Hanoi launched a major military action, known as the Easter Offensive, to take advantage of a shift in US strategy. Under President Nixon's Vietnam-

⁷ The task force was named after a commander of the Laotian army in Military Region IV in southern Laos. (U)

responsible for all of the irregular forces and intelligence teams in the area.

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According to the testimony of his managers, Kearns showed a genuine respect for the Laotian people and a concern for their well-being. Early on, he demonstrated a leadership ability that enabled him to motivate his men to undertake difficult and dangerous assignments. From all indications, he wrote clear reports, worked hard, and established good relationships with colleagues. (S)

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Kearns demonstrated personal courage on several occasions during this period. Once, despite suffering a high fever from malaria, he insisted on overflying dangerous terrain to support one of his teams in securing a helicopter landing zone for a major troop infiltration behind enemy lines. On another occasion, in June 1971, Kearns volunteered to try a cable landing from a helicopter to search for the missing crew of a crashed C-46 aircraft. Dense foliage had prohibited a ground search. He made it down, but only had ten minutes on the ground due to his helicopter's shortage of fuel. During that time he extracted the copilot's body, inspected the part of the fuselage that could be entered, and called out in vain for survivors. (S)

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ization policy, which aimed to transfer responsibility for the prosecution of the war from US to South Vietnamese hands, US combat strength had been drawn down from a high of 543,000 troops in early 1969 to 69,000 in June 1972. Another 20,000 troops were slated to be sent home by 1 July 1972. The enemy told his cadres that this offensive was intended to “gain decisive victory in 1972,” by means of “widespread military attacks coordinated with mass popular uprisings.” The aim was to “totally change the face of the war in South Vietnam.”¹⁴ (U)

On 24 April 1972, US Army Gen. Creighton Abrams called Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird that the NVA was holding nothing back. “Their last reserve division has been moved south near the [demilitarized zone],” he reported. “Four divisions and an independent regiment had already been brought

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down from north Vietnam, joining the seven divisions, twenty-two independent regiments, and seven artillery regiments already in South Vietnam.”¹⁵ (U)

Hugh Tovar, who was COS in Vietnam from 1970-1973, recalls a meeting with National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger in Washington in July 1972, during which Kissinger was emphatic that the NVA should be attacked intensely throughout Laos. Also present were CIA Deputy Director for Operations William Nelson and Laotian

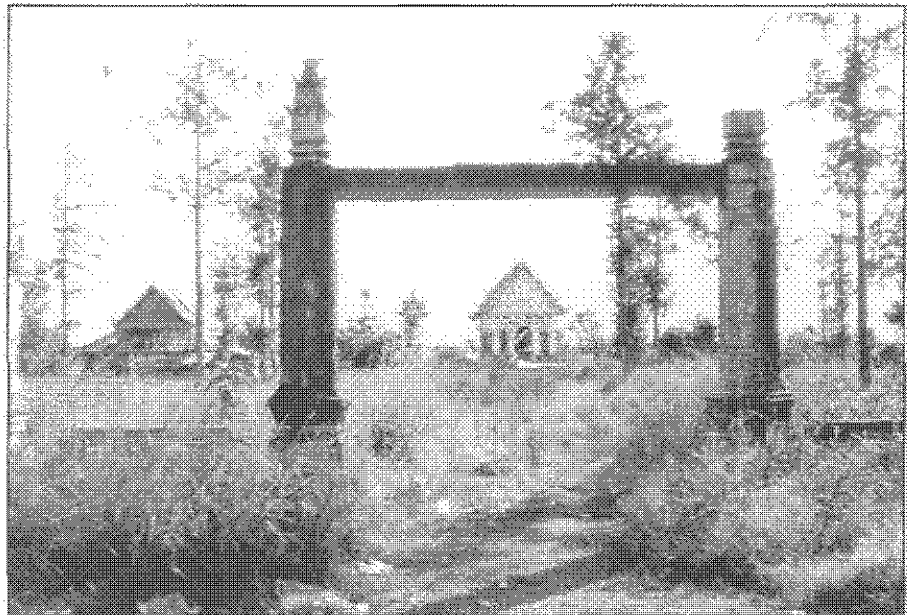
commander Vang Pao, whom Tovar had brought with him to Washington. Tovar recalls that Kissinger wanted to harass the NVA in Laos, bleed them, and tie them down. By disrupting the enemy's ability to rely on a stabilized situation in the adjacent country, Washington could prevent substantial numbers of NVA troops from joining the communist offensive in South Vietnam. Action in Laos would also strengthen Kissinger's hand in his ongoing negotiations with North Vietnamese representative Le Duc Tho in Paris.¹⁶

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¹⁴ Souley, p. 325. (U)

¹⁵ North Vietnam and the Vietcong were determined to go all out for a military victory in the south in the spring of 1972, using conventional forces. A former Minister of Justice in the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam (PRG), Trong Nhu Tang, has written about the decision to undertake the offensive. At a meeting in January 1972, PRG President Huynh Tan Phat apparently recounted how the Vietcong had regained strength following their losses during the 1968 Tet Offensive; the US had withdrawn huge numbers of troops and was vulnerable; politically because of South Vietnamese military weakness; and the situation in Cambodia and Laos was adequately stabilized to support the war effort. At the end of the meeting, Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN) Secretary Nguyen Van Liah stated: “We intend to drive the Americans into a corner and force concessions from them before the presidential elections. If possible, we mean to destroy Nixon's chances for reelection.” See Trong Nhu Tang (with David Chanoff and Dean Van Toan), *A Viet Cong Memoir* (New York, NY: Random House, 1985), pp. 199-205. (U)

¹⁶ Vietnam's Military History Institute, *A History of the People's Army of Vietnam*, as quoted in Lewis Sodley, *A Better War* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1999), pp. 199-205, 437. (U)



Countryside around Pakse, Laos, 1972. (Photos supplied by former CIA (b)(3)(c) _____) (S)

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**Kearns was one of the
'Young Turks' in Laos
who wanted to
take the fight directly
to the NVA.**

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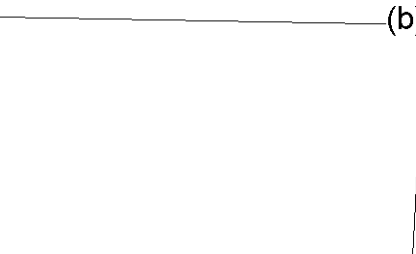
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case officers were responsible for advising, supporting, and leading this task force of about 4,400 men. They were not assigned to specific battalions, but traveled, met, and advised units, as needed. Each case officer and each BC had an operational assistant known as a forward air guide, who facilitated communication between the case officers and the units. Both the case officer (b)(1) and their (b)(1) assistant (b)(3)(c) would call in tactical air support (b)(3)(n) (b)(3)(c) (b)(3)(c) (b)(3)(n)

Three *Groques mobiles* (GM) (b)(1) rising an additional 3,600 (b)(3)(c) s, most of whom were (b)(3)(n) also operated out of (b)(3)(n)

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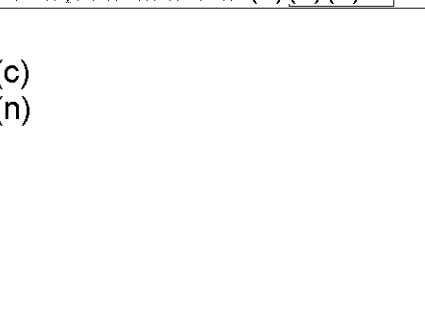


There were days when all the (b)(1) case officers, including the team (b)(3)(c) had to be in the field. None (b)(3)(c) traveled only during (b)(3)(n) hours. They almost always used Porter aircraft or helicopters, sometimes traveling by



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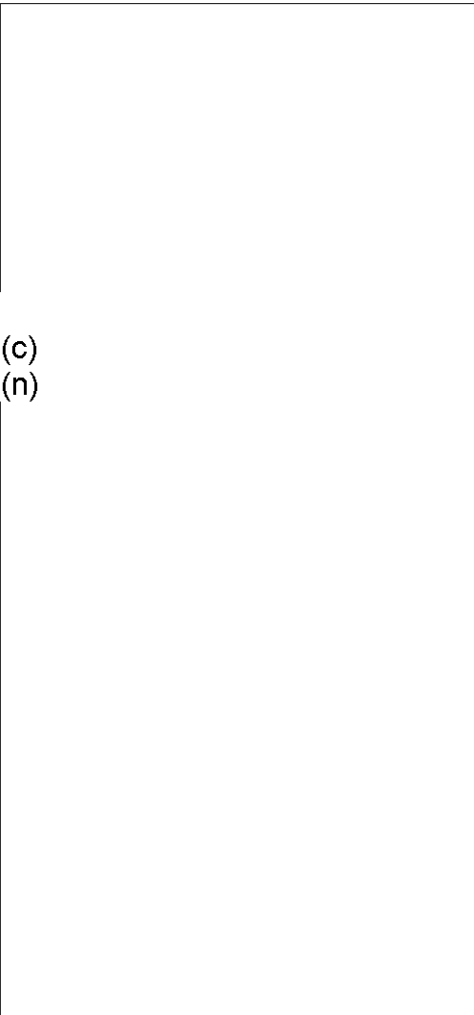
Forward air guides with the irregular (b)(1) in Laos. (S) (b)(1) (b)(3)(c) jeep east along Route (b)(3)(c) (b)(3)(n) this point controlled (b)(3)(n)



All of Kearns's supervisors describe him as a highly capable, reliable case officer, who exercised good judgment and got along well with everyone. He loved his work. He tended to be quiet and unassuming, but was definitely

(b)(1)
(b)(3)(c) sive in leading the (b)(1)
(b)(3)(n) against the NVA. The task force chief recalls that one of the case officers had a family emergency (b)(1)

(b)(1) At times, this resulted in Kearns being assigned to the field almost every day. According to his supervisor, he preferred the field to staying (b)(1) behind in (b)(1) was con- (b)(3)(c) sidered fearless. A case officer who shared living quarters with Kearns (b)(3)(n) described him as one of the "Young Turks" in Laos who wanted to take the fight directly to the enemy, the NVA. (S)



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He directed counter-battery fire . . . and supervised as much of the evacuation of the wounded by helicopter as he could before being evacuated himself.

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flank in Laos. Nonetheless, Hanoi apparently felt it had no choice but to commit some 2,000 additional infantry and tank troops to try to prevent the capture of Paksong. (C/NF)

The Pakse Battlefield (U)

During the early summer of 1972,

the NVA had advanced to within 12 kilometers of the town and appeared determined to keep the irregular forces bottled up there. The units of Task Force Phasouk broke out, however, and began to push the NVA back along Route 23 toward Paksong, a town located 52 kilometers to the east on the strategic Bolovens Plateau. The plateau overlooked the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the communists' resupply route between North Vietnam and the war zone in the south. For some time, the Agency had placed road watchers on the plateau to gather intelligence on the movement of NVA troops and supplies. Now, the push of the thousands of irregulars in Task Force Phasouk toward Paksong presented a new and more significant threat to the NVA. From the plateau, the US-led irregulars could not only monitor movement along the trail, but also attack supply trains with mortar and artillery fire. (C)

The NVA counterattacked in August, the month that Kearns arrived. They shot down two aircraft near Paksong, ambushed an

Or (b)(1) A Second Front (b)(3)(c)

Or (b)(3)(c)er, while the (b)(3)(n) we (b)(3)(n)g with (b)(3)(n) 19 kilometers east of (b)(3)(n) the CIA. (b)(3)(n) opened a second front. (b)(3)(n)

(b)(3)(n) began with the airlift of two *Grands Mobiles* to a spot (b)(1) 3 kilometers southwest of the (b)(3)(c) controlled town of Saravane. (b)(3)(n)

Located in a valley north of the Bolovens Plateau, nearly 100 kilometers northeast of Paksong, Saravane sat astride an important junction of rivers and highways used by the NVA to send troops and supplies into South Vietnam and Cambodia.



Transports destroyed to prevent their falling into North Vietnamese hands. (U)

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The CIA-led action caught the NVA completely off guard. They had committed considerable manpower to protecting Paksong against Task Force Phasouk. Now they faced shifting additional forces to head off the capture of Saravane. (C)

After fighting house to house along the route of advance, the *Groupes Mobiles* secured Saravane on 27 October. The NVA counterattacked, continuously shelling the irregulars on the night of 1-2 November. On 15 November, NVA battalions succeeded in reoccupying Saravane. According to CIA reporting, the entire civilian population withdrew with the irregulars. Tactical air strikes caused heavy damage to enemy troops in the town, and irregular forces engaged the remaining NVA troops as they left

the town after the air strikes. Casualties were heavy on both sides. According to Agency officers involved, Hanoi had committed over 2,000 troops to the recapture of Saravane. On 21 November, however, three GM battalions (1,200 men) reentered the town. The situation remained fluid in the area as NVA units constantly shifted in anticipation of action by Laotian government and irregular forces. (C)

(b)(1)
(b)(3)(c)
Back at Paksong (b)(3)(n) (b)(1)

Along Route 23 east of Paksong, irregular units were experiencing a series of shelling and probes.

(b)(1) received more than 150 rounds of (b)(3)(c) and mortar, grenade, and rocket (b)(3)(n)

fire. Then, beginning on 21 November, new NVA units moved into the Lao Ngam area, near Paksong. (C)

On 26 November, while the NVA was fighting for control of Saravane, the CIA arranged for the airlift of almost 1,500 GM irregulars to an area 18 kilometers north of Paksong. Once again the NVA was caught off guard by a significant movement of troops directed by

[redacted] On the following day, these irregulars began moving south toward the town. Three battalions of [redacted] were added to the force moving on Paksong. Resistance increased. On 3 December the NVA sent tanks into the area, but tactical air strikes were called in against them. Finally, on 6 December, GM forces took control of Paksong. Within days, the irregulars also commanded the strategic high ground immediately east of the town. (C)

Over the next few weeks, the situation around Paksong remained fluid. Sporadic clashes indicated that the NVA had not conceded the area. On 15 December, Kearns was on the ground near Paksong supervising the infiltration of several hundred replacement troops for a [redacted] battalion exhausted by combat; [redacted]

[redacted] and who had arrived on the scene by helicopter. At 1930 hours, eight rounds of 82mm mortar fire impacted near a battalion of Thai irregulars; hours later, 15 more rounds slammed in. A C-47 "Spooky" gunship silenced the suspected mortar positions, but there were casualties. Among them, John Kearns. (S)

Although Kearns was seriously wounded in the mortar attack, he

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The efforts of Agency officers in Laos were . . . an important part of our nation's . . . ultimate victory in the Cold War.

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directed counter-battery fire, led others to safety, and supervised as much of the evacuation of the wounded by helicopter as he could before being evacuated himself, his operations assistant reported.

Kearns died en route to the hospital. A mortar fragment had pierced his aorta. (S)

(b)(1)
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Denouement (U)

CIA-supported action continued in the Paksong/Saravane area for several weeks after Kearns's death.

While Task Force Phasouk and GM irregulars were securing Paksong, an NVA battalion launched a counterattack against the Laotian irregulars holding Saravane. Under the cover of hundreds of mortar rounds, the NVA gained a foothold in the northern half of the town and then launched a massive assault. NVA pressure was relentless, including the shelling of one key GM position with 5,500 rounds of mortar, howitzer, rocket, tank, and recoilless rifle fire, according to CIA field reporting. The irregulars were forced to withdraw in the second week of January. (C)

Despite the signing of the Paris Peace Accords on 27 January 1973, the enemy increased its military activity in Laos. Following the recapture of Saravane, Hanoi sent additional troops against the irregulars securing the Pakse-Paksong corridor. On 8 February, a heavy NVA barrage and infantry assaults forced a disorderly retreat from Paksong—over 500 irregulars deserted their units that night and fled back to Pakse. The Agency was able to stabilize several of the GM units, however, and they recaptured Paksong on 12 February. The town remained in non-communist hands as the ceasefire finally began

to take hold in March and a general calm settled over southern Laos. (C)

In the Final Analysis (U)

CIA officers and their irregular forces fought elements of at least four and possibly five NVA divisions in Laos. In their efforts to retain control over the strategic Laotian towns of Paksong and Saravane, the NVA had committed nine battalions from two different divisions against the CIA-led irregulars. Troops from a third NVA division were also reported in southern Laos toward the end of 1972. During the same timeframe, the irregulars in northern Laos confronted units of two more mainline NVA Divisions. (C)

During the Easter Offensive, the enemy suffered more than 100,000 casualties in its attacking force of 200,000—including possibly 40,000 killed. They lost more than half of their tanks and heavy artillery. The anticipated general uprising of the South Vietnamese people in support of the communists failed to occur. North Vietnamese General Vo Nguyen Giap later was removed as commander of the North Vietnamese Army, almost certainly in part because of the failed Easter Offensive.¹² (U)

¹² Sorley, pp. 339-340. (U)

In the communist onslaught, the South Vietnamese lost more than 8,000 killed, some 24,000 wounded, and nearly 3,000 missing. These casualties almost certainly would have been greater if the CIA-supported irregulars had not diverted and engaged so many NVA units in Laos, substantially impeding Hanoi's ability to reinforce its divisions in South Vietnam.¹³ (S)

It took three years for Hanoi to recover sufficiently from these losses to mount another major offensive. After the Paris Peace Accords were signed, the North Vietnamese began to rebuild their army and resupply their troops, which were allowed to remain in place in the south under the terms of the Accords. South Vietnam came under communist rule in April 1975, followed soon thereafter by Cambodia and Laos. (U)

Hanoi won the battle for South Vietnam in the arena of American public opinion, not on the ground. America's Armed Forces and the Central Intelligence Agency left Indochina with their courage, integrity, and professionalism intact. They would be needed in the battles that were to come—in Afghanistan, Grenada, Panama, and Iraq. The sacrifices and efforts of the men and women who served in Laos were not in vain. They were an important part of our nation's overall effort as we moved forward

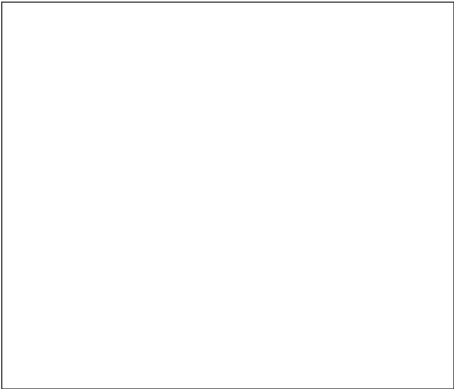
¹³ The author, who was the CIA Province-Officer-In-Charge in Kien Giang Province in South Vietnam from June 1972 to March 1973, recalls being the beneficiary of the efforts of the CIA irregulars in Laos. POW interrogations in September 1972 revealed that the 1st NVA Division, which had been attacking in both Kien Giang and Chau Doc Provinces in the Vietnamese Delta, was reduced to substantially less than half its strength—fewer than 1,500 men—largely because of the difficulty in receiving reinforcements. (S)

from victories on the (b)(1) field to
the ultimate victory (b)(3)(c) d
War. (S) (b)(3)(n)
(b)(6)

Postscript (U)

John Kearns was awarded the Intel-
ligence Star posthumously. [redacted]

[redacted] (b)(1)
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(b)(1)
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