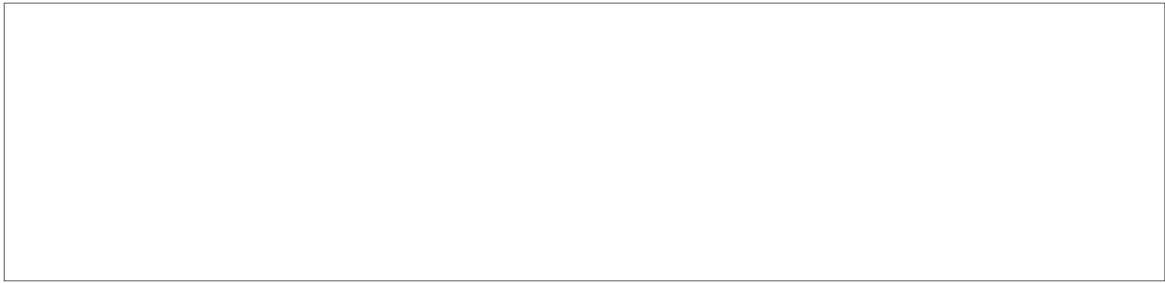


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**John W. Kearnes, III (1942 – 1972)**



~~(S)~~ John Wesley Kearns was killed in Laos on 15 December 1972 during a devastating mortar attack by North Vietnamese Army troops against an Agency-supported Thai irregular unit.

~~(S)~~ John Kearns, born in 1942, grew up in Texas and joined the US Army Special Forces upon graduation from high school. Like many young soldiers of his generation, he was soon posted to Vietnam, where he earned the Combat Infantryman's Badge for valor under enemy fire. He returned home in 1965 and earned a degree in geography and economics at North Texas State University in 1968.

~~(S)~~ During his Army tour in Vietnam, John met several CIA employees and learned about the Agency's growing role in the war effort in Southeast Asia. This exposure helped him decide what he wanted to do after college. In June 1968 John joined the CIA on contract as a paramilitary (PM) officer. A year later, in June 1969, after completing intensive operational training, he was assigned to our Station in Vientiane, Laos as a PM operations officer.

*Fast Facts:*

Directorate served:  
Directorate of Plans (now  
National Clandestine  
Service)

Position title:  
Paramilitary Operations  
Officer

Grade:  
GS-10

Award date:  
1974

~~(S)~~ John spent his first year in Laos as an advisor to a small team at Nam Yu in the north. This unit was responsible for assisting and supporting pro-government irregular forces and intelligence teams in the area. At that time Nam Yu was the site of four CIA subsections inside Laos under the operational direction of the CIA base in Udom, Thailand. Some [ ] Agency case officers worked at the four posts. Counting these officers, plus working wives and military detailees, the total complement at Udom itself was about [ ] people.

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~~(S)~~ In 1970 and 1971, Kearns was posted in Long Tieng as "commando/raider" officer. In this capacity he became heavily involved in high-priority special operations in which Laotian action teams sought to inflict heavy damage against North Vietnamese installations deep in enemy-held territory. John oversaw all phases of these operations— planning, training, team leadership, motivation, command and control, and post-mission debriefing and analysis. Like many other young CIA paramilitary operations officers serving in Indochina, he demonstrated great personal courage on many occasions. In one instance, while enduring a high fever from malaria, he insisted on overflying dangerous terrain to help one of his teams in securing a helicopter landing zone for a major troop infiltration behind enemy lines. In 1971, Kearns volunteered to try a cable landing from a helicopter to search for the missing crew of a crashed C-46 aircraft. Despite dense foliage that prohibited a ground search, and with low fuel restricting him to ten

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minutes on the ground (while the helicopter hovered above), he extracted the co-pilot's body from the wreckage.

(S) Upon completion of his first Agency tour in Laos in October 1971, John returned to CIA Headquarters and enrolled in full-time intensive Thai language training. After four months he emerged with a good understanding of the language and speaking abilities. He then completed the basic clandestine operations course. In August 1972, John and his new wife [redacted] returned to Laos. John was initially assigned to Long Tieng in northern Laos, and then to Pakse in the south. [redacted] like other dependent wives, stayed in [redacted] where John would visit her whenever possible.

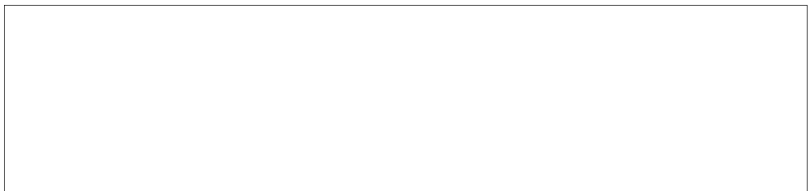
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(S) John was caught up in Agency efforts to counter the most extensive offensive yet undertaken in Laos by the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and the Vietcong. By the end of 1972, Agency officers in Laos were guiding and supporting 40,000 Thai and Laotian irregular troops in operations that tied down elements of at least four NVA divisions, preventing them from joining the war against the South Vietnamese government and allied US forces.

(S) On 15 December 1972, John Kearns was in the Paksong area, supervising the infiltration of several hundred replacement troops for a battalion exhausted from combat. That evening eight rounds of 82mm mortar fire impacted near the battalion; hours later 15 more rounds slammed in. A C-47 gunship silenced the suspected mortar positions, but not before casualties had been suffered—among them, John Kearns. Although seriously wounded, John directed counter-battery fire, led others to safety, and supervised evacuation of the wounded by helicopter before being evacuated himself. John Kearns died en route to the hospital. A mortar fragment had pierced his aorta.

(U) John Wesley Kearns, III was 30 years old when he was killed. He was posthumously awarded the Agency's Intelligence Star for his courage and sacrifice. John was survived by his wife, who at that time was expecting the birth of their son<sup>1</sup>.

For a detailed article on John Kearns' assignment in Laos, please refer to **Studies In Intelligence**, Vol. 46, No. 4, 2002 – *Recalling a CIA Officer's Sacrifice; John Kearns and the Cold War in Laos*.



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