

Recollections of a Case Officer in Laos, 1962-1964

No Drums, No Bugles

Richard L. Holm

In early January 1962, I arrived in Vientiane, Laos, for my first assignment with the Central Intelligence Agency. Young case officers like myself, having completed basic training for the Clandestine Service and then paramilitary (PM) instruction, were being sent out in support of President Kennedy's decision to hold the line against communist expansion. Trying to help the Laotians maintain their territorial integrity and their "independent" government was a tall order for a new officer. The demand for quick decisionmaking and constant flexibility to handle the unexpected in a war zone proved to be excellent preparation for my long career as a case officer in the field.

Assignment Laos

I traveled to Vientiane with three colleagues—the four of us had trained together and now would serve together in Southeast Asia. In the area of the airport reserved for Air America operations, we were met by Bill Lair and Pat Landry, among others. These officers were already legends. Bill Lair headed the Agency's paramilitary operations in Laos. He had come to Southeast Asia in the early 1950s and spent a decade in Thailand organizing and training the elite Thai Police group called the Police Air Reconnaissance Unit (PARU). Landry had served in Indonesia during the

Reconnaissance Unit (PARU). Landry had served in Indonesia during the communist rebellion in the late 1950s, where he had almost been captured and was eventually ex-filtrated by submarine. Landry, now Lair's deputy, carried a swagger stick, and it was easy to picture him handling tough and dangerous situations.

Lair was soft-spoken and quiet, but one sensed a man who was reflecting on issues. When he came to conclusions, you knew they were well considered. Landry had a gruff exterior but was in reality a considerate and caring man. He worried about his subordinates, especially the "kids" he was sending up country. In their own ways, both were great guys and splendid to work for.

Tribal Operations

Lao communist forces, known as the Pathet Lao (PL), were challenging the government's Royal Lao Army (FAR) throughout the country. Although badly organized and poorly trained and equipped, the PL was bolstered by support from North Vietnam, whose units were called the VC (Vietnamese Communists).

The opposing forces in Laos at the time also included a renegade FAR captain, Kong Le, who commanded an elite battalion of parachutists. Angered by corruption in the FAR, he had staged a coup in Vientiane in 1960. When the coup failed, he had broken away from the FAR to form what he called neutralist forces. This group, known as the KL, fought the FAR, but not the PL or the VC.



The United States had opted to use Agency for International Development (AID) programs, AID advisers, and ultimately “covert action” to bolster the Lao government. The CIA’s paramilitary efforts in Laos were divided roughly along geographic lines: There were separate programs in north Laos, where I was initially assigned; central Laos—also known as the Panhandle—where I would later be assigned; and south Laos. Each program involved working with different tribal/ethnic groups, such as the Hmong in the mountainous north and the Lao in the lowlands.

Although the Hmong and the Lao had a common enemy, they did not like each other. Nonetheless, they had their own reasons for working with us and their objectives were complementary. North Vietnam’s primary goal was to make free use of eastern Laos to support its war against South Vietnam. The average tribesman could not have distinguished between communism and capitalism, but the ethnic groups felt threatened by the Lao communists and their Vietnamese supporters and decided to fight to preserve their autonomy and their territory. All they wanted from us was financial and material support.

The biggest and most active of our programs was the one in north Laos supporting the Hmong tribe.¹ Bill Lair struck the first agreement at a meeting with leader Vang Pao in December 1960. For the Hmong, it began more than a decade of fighting and dying.

First Posting

In mid-July 1962, Pat Landry told me that I was being assigned to Ban Na just west of the Plain des Jars (PDJ). The region was quiet, and I was to concentrate on getting a landing strip lengthened. Only single-engine planes or helicopters could land, and we needed it to handle twin-engine planes. I was flown to Ban Na in a single-engine Helio-Courier. A short-takeoff-and-landing (STOL) aircraft, the Helio did yeoman service for Air America.

Before we departed, my pilot introduced me to Panit, the leader of the four-man PARU team that would work with me in Ban Na. The team members, who had been at Ban Na for three months, had been selected from hundreds of applicants. All PARU personnel were at least high school

from hundreds of applicants. All PARU personnel were at least high school graduates, and most spoke a language from a neighboring country in addition to Thai. They were trained at a jungle camp in central Thailand and organized like the US Army Special Forces. Counterinsurgency tactics were one of their specialties.

In addition to their general training, PARU personnel all had specific capabilities designed to enhance small unit operations. Panit was a weapons man, which meant that he could handle the whole range of weapons that we were providing to the Hmong. His team consisted of a medic, a radio operator, and an explosives expert. All four could provide basic training, and all were jump qualified. They exuded confidence and a willingness to get things done.

Settling In

To lengthen the landing strip, Panit had begun work to remove a big hump in the middle of an adjacent sloping area. When I arrived, the villagers were using hoes and shovels to dig at the hump and then carrying away the dirt in wicker baskets slung on poles. What we really needed was a bulldozer, but I quickly judged that some cratering charges would at least help. With such charges, Panit predicted that the strip would be ready in two weeks. I cabled Landry for the explosives.



Perimeter outpost at Ban Na. (Photos courtesy of author.)

The second day, Panit showed me the outposts around Ban Na, which formed a semi-circle facing the Plaine des Jarres, an area under the control of the PL and the KL since 1960. Each outpost had mortar and machinegun emplacements and a small shelter in which some 15 Hmong ate and slept. At each stop, we looked at maps while the team leader explained why the particular outpost was placed where it was. Each site afforded a good view of a portion of the western section of the plain. The PDJ is a prominent, and unusual, geographic feature in north Laos. The plateau was so named by the French colonialists because of the enormous, centuries-old earthen jars that are strewn about it. Midway between Vientiane and the border with North Vietnam, the plain covers more than 30 square miles. At that time, the VC had free run of the PDJ and truck convoys from North Vietnam arrived regularly during the dry season bringing all types of supplies for the PL and KL units in the area.

A Quiet Routine

Life in Ban Na featured few highlights. Days were spent working on the hump at the airstrip, training the Hmong, and walking to nearby outposts. Our radio contacts kept us aware of the day of the month. Evenings passed quickly. We would sit around and talk, but communications were difficult, since only Panit spoke good English and none of the PARU spoke French.

Dinner was always an adventure as the PARU strove to prepare things that I would like; however, there really was not much choice—pieces of chicken or pork (sometimes beef or horsemeat), boiled rice (because the Thai were not that fond of sticky rice), and some kind of green vegetable; all of it boiled or stir-fried over a wood fire. It was always spicy, as both the Thai and the Hmong love red peppers.

Managing my PARU team was not difficult, because they knew more about what was going on than I did. Thai and Lao languages are similar, and the Hmong all spoke at least basic Lao in addition to their native tongue. My most important role was to serve as the link to Lair and Landry in Vientiane to ensure that the villagers and my team received the supplies that they needed. This made me a key person, and they all knew it.

I met regularly with the Nai Ban (the village chief), who, in this case, was also a Nai Khong (chief of a group of villages), to discuss supplies. Because most of the local men had become fighters, agricultural activity was almost at a standstill. Therefore, the village required food supplies regularly to augment the meager amounts they were producing. Periodically, I would send a cable to Landry to request a rice drop. Our system was amazingly efficient. I could always count on prompt responses to my cables. Within one or two days, sometimes within hours, the drop would arrive. One hundred to 200 sacks of rice would land in our drop zone. We also received drops of uniforms, boots, tools, and whatever else was needed. Weapons and ammo came by Helio, chopper, or parachute.

Tactical Activity

One of the reasons we wanted the longer strip at Ban Na was so that we could bring in more supplies to build up Hmong defenses on the western end of the PDJ. We sent out patrols and individual villagers frequently to watch what the enemy was doing, and I reported regularly to Vientiane.

I had arrived during the rainy season when enemy mobility was greatly decreased by impassable roads. That was one of the reasons our sector was so quiet in July. The Hmong got around easily in the mountains, however, which gave us the advantage until the next dry season started in October or November. We were able to conduct hit-and-run attacks on enemy supply points with relative impunity. Our ultimate goal was to retake the PDJ, thereby relieving pressure on the Hmong territory all around it.

Over the Hump

True to his word, Panit had the hump removed and the length of the landing strip almost doubled in just over two weeks after we received the cratering charges. With the end in sight, the villagers, mostly women, worked steadily after the charges simplified their task. The Air America pilot who came to check out the airstrip gave it his OK despite a dip in the middle and an uphill slope to the whole strip. Rolling uphill after landing would help planes stop, he said, and going downhill on take off was also a plus.

The Ban Na strip could now handle the Caribou, a Canadian-made STOL aircraft with great stability at low speeds. It could land on strips not much longer than those needed by the Helio, but, with two engines and a rear-opening ramp, it had a much greater payload. Bringing it into Ban Na meant getting more supplies closer to the PDJ, a strategic step forward. A few days later, the first Caribou landed without problems at Ban Na. The pilot said that he had room to spare.

Back to Vientiane

In less than three weeks, I had adapted quickly to the routine and knew the sector well, having walked all over it. I was absorbed in and enjoying my work, and felt like I was contributing something tangible to an important objective. But a cable came ordering me back to Vientiane for reassignment.

The capital city was quite a change. Primarily inhabited by Lao lowlanders who comprised the majority of the 3 million inhabitants of the country, Vientiane also had large numbers of foreigners, including Chinese, Indian, Thai, Vietnamese, and French. These foreigners, mostly merchants, created the hustle and bustle evident in many parts of the city.



Author at Phou Song, with the Hmong village leader.

Lao politics at the time would have been grist for Shakespeare's mill: a king without power, royal princes working toward conflicting goals, corrupt politicians selling influence and position, and military officers manipulating the system. Mainly because of the infusion of aid funds and supplies coming into Laos, there was a lot of money to be made in Vientiane. Graft and corruption thrived. Working discreetly (sometimes openly) with Lao politicians and military officers, foreign merchants siphoned off huge sums

politicians and military officers, foreign merchants siphoned off huge sums of official money.

In retrospect, a greater understanding of what was going on in Laos might have enabled us to work more effectively and perhaps would have spared some of the pain that the country experienced. We knew about the corruption, but few Americans wanted to take on the job of trying to control it. I was fully involved in our program and considered our effort as something apart from the mess in the capital. We saw ourselves as supporting US policy and we believed in it.

When I walked into Pat Landry's office, he asked if I had ever heard of Phou Song. I had not, and he said that it was north of Ban Na. Our program was expanding into that area, and he needed me up there to keep things organized. Phou Song also had a PARU team for me to work with. Although the area was "quiet," he acknowledged that he was worried about what the PL units nearby had on their minds. And, with that, Landry said that I was to leave in a few hours.

Phou Song

The accommodations at Phou Song turned out to be similar to Ban Na, but the setting was surprisingly different. Again, I found myself watching a Helio depart, leaving me, this time, in a Hmong village high on a mountain in north Laos. Phou Song was bigger than Ban Na. It occupied less than a third of a large, flat area more than halfway up the mountain for which it was named. It was near the edge of a precipitous drop into the valley. Because of the large open space next to and behind the village, Phou Song had a large drop zone and a landing strip that could easily accommodate twin-engine STOL aircraft. Thanks to the AID program, there was a warehouse for storing rice, clothing, and other materiel that was regularly distributed to nearby villages.

Phou Song was more secure than Ban Na because the only approaches to it were easy to monitor and block. The nearest PL camps were at the far end of the valley and on the other side from our village. The majority of the men from the area were fighters. Phou Song was a focal point for our program's efforts in the area. The PARU leader, Prasert, and his team members were quite friendly. The team and I occupied two houses near the warehouse at the edge of the airstrip. I quickly decided that I liked

Phou Song.

Flying . . . and Walking

My work at Phou Song was more demanding than at Ban Na. Besides the routine things like logistics and training, I had to move around constantly. I would cable Landry explaining that I had to go to this or that village and needed a Helio for the day, and early the next morning, one would arrive. Prasert frequently went with me, but, after I got to know the region, I sometimes went alone. On those occasions a lot depended on the availability of French (or sometimes even English) speakers.

In the villages that I visited, we would talk about what nearby enemy units were doing and about needs of all kinds. We supplied everything from weapons and ammunition to schoolbooks, medicines, rice and salt, uniforms, building materials, and money. For some of these things, I was simply the middleman making arrangements for an AID delivery to a given village.

Sometimes, no plane was available or the place I was going had no landing strip, so I would take a Hmong patrol and a couple of the PARU and walk. We limited these walks to distances that could be covered in less than two days, round trip. More than that took too much of my time.

These trips were especially challenging. From Phou Song, the bulk of the walking was strenuous—it was either up or down. Moreover, it was the middle of the rainy season, and the frequent rainstorms made the mountain trails muddy and slippery. The first times out were real tests. Everyone was watching to see how the foreigner would handle the trails. Suspecting that I would have a hard time, they made it as easy as possible for me. I took no pack, just my weapon and web belt. The small Hmong soldiers carried packs plus their weapons and food and water.

An Emergency Situation

Shortly after I got to Phou Song, I scheduled a plane to take me to three villages in our region. At the second village, a colleague was waiting for me. He said that a Helio had gone down and that the pilot might be injured. Members of a Hmong patrol thought that they had seen where the Helio hit the side of the mountain. This was a serious situation. If a plane or chopper went down, every possible effort would immediately be made to rescue those aboard. We all knew that if something happened, our colleagues would come after us. We decided to lead a Hmong patrol to the crash site. I wrote a note informing Landry of our decision and gave it to my Helio pilot to deliver.

Eight Hmong accompanied us. There was a sense of urgency. We maintained a fairly fast pace and took few rests. The first couple of hours we headed downhill toward the valley below. The Hmong thought that the plane was on the far side of the mountain in front of us. There were PL positions near there, so a chopper rescue was not feasible.

The jungle on the valley floor was thick. There was a trail of sorts, but the undergrowth had almost closed in. We had to cross the valley and head up the mountain in front of us. Despite the terrain, we managed to traverse the area in less than two hours.

At mid-afternoon, we started to climb. We were having no trouble keeping up with the Hmong. We climbed for about three hours until almost nightfall, and then started looking for a place to spend the night. We came to a clearing and saw a hut at the far end. It was abandoned, and we moved in.

That night, I did not fall asleep right away. I thought about where I was and what I was doing. I was more isolated and vulnerable than I had ever been, but I was doing what I definitely thought was right. I felt lucky to have the chance that only a few ever have of actually making a difference. I was confident that I could handle whatever might come up and felt sure that the patrol would succeed.

The next day we started climbing again. Two Hmong had left at daybreak to do a reconnaissance above us. As we pushed ahead, I was struck by how much we depended on the Hmong. We had no idea where the plane might be and no landmarks to use to get there—or back. They realized the situation, but they also counted on us for the support we could call in. There was great mutual trust and respect.

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An hour or so after we started, the two scouts reappeared. I could tell by their faces that the news was bad. They talked excitedly with the patrol leader and then he gave it to us in French. The pilot was dead—he had probably died on impact as the front of the plane was smashed in. There had been no fire. They had hidden the pilot's body away from the crash site.

The two had seen activity far below them that caused them to think a PL unit might be moving up the mountain from the opposite direction to check out the crash site. We had no idea how many PL might be coming, but prudence dictated a retreat. We started back, and the walking was easy because we were headed down and around the mountain. Then we heard the welcome sound of a Helio. My colleague pulled out his emergency line-of-sight radio. The pilot must have had his mike open because he picked us up right away. But we received more bad news. Intelligence reporting available in Vientiane indicated that PL units had moved into the valley that we had come through. We were cut off. Taking no chances, Landry planned to get us out by helicopter as soon as possible.

Evasion and Escape

It took us 10 minutes to retrace our steps to a clearing higher up and put out a marker—the patrol leader had one in his pack that he used when receiving parachute drops while on patrol. One Hmong was posted on the trail just above the clearing with instructions to come running when he saw the chopper. None of us wanted the helicopter to stay on the ground for more than a couple of minutes.

We called the Helio and they told us that the pilot was en route and would be in position in five or 10 minutes. As soon as a large cloud filled the valley and obscured vision, the chopper came in. We heard it before we saw it. The pilot hugged the side of the mountain, then swung around and touched down right in the middle of the clearing. He even had the door facing us. The Air America pilots were truly outstanding—they had incredible skills and guts.

Concern and Relief

Although it made perfect sense at the time, we had gone off on what turned out to be an unauthorized dangerous mission. If an Agency officer were to fall into enemy hands, there would be hell to pay in Washington. A lot of nervous people had been following developments when it became known the night before that we were out looking for the downed pilot.

Lair and Landry were waiting for us in Vientiane. They looked relieved and happy to see us. Lair suggested that “next time” it would not be a bad idea to wait for instructions.

His typically low key comment belied the concern and the responsibility he felt very strongly. We were two of the eight young American officers for whom he was accountable. These young officers were spread thinly and worked hard—we would not have had it any other way. We took our losses even in those early days—both Agency officers and the pilots who were supporting us. But we got the job done.

Friends, who worked directly with Landry in the office, later told me that he had been genuinely concerned and really torn as the situation developed. On the one hand, he was frustrated and irritated that we had made the decision on our own to leave with the patrol. He knew that it would be dangerous. But he also was proud of us. In the end, he was so relieved that we were back safely that he did not yell at us.

Withdrawal Preparations

I spent a few additional weeks in Phou Song working to expand our program. But time soon ran out on us. As a result of political decisions in Washington relating to the 1962 Geneva Protocol on the Neutrality of Laos, word came that we were to be withdrawn from Laos.²

This was a bitter pill. All of our observations and reporting had indicated that the VC had no intention of pulling any of their units out of Laos. To the contrary, their activities, especially in east-central Laos, were increasing. Despite the evidence that we had provided, the State

Department was determined to live by the conditions of the Protocol that Ambassador Harriman had signed.

My fellow Agency officers and I argued—successfully, it turned out—that it would be wrong to leave the Hmong high and dry. Two advisers discreetly remained at Long Tieng, Vang Pao's headquarters, to monitor the situation.

Initially, Lair and Landry moved their program headquarters to Nong Khai, just across the Mekong River in Thailand. To get there from Vientiane, one could take a five-minute flight or catch a ferry across the river—the ferry was just a small tug-like craft with an underpowered engine. The arrival of the gaggle of foreigners was a jolt to what had been a sleepy little town. The local population adjusted quickly, however, and welcomed the boost that our presence gave to the economy. Among other things, the sale of Singha beer jumped noticeably.

Udorn, a much larger Thai town about 50 kilometers further south, had a large airport with a long concrete runway built by AID. Udorn became a major US airbase and staging area for combat and supply flights into Laos in support of US efforts to support the Lao government. Eventually, in early 1963, Lair and Landry moved their program headquarters to a new facility in a restricted-access compound at Udorn airbase. Their effort had grown too large to be managed out of a rented house in Nong Khai.

Meanwhile, in late September 1962, Landry told me that I would be taking over their project in the Panhandle, which was in its early stages. The North Vietnamese were occupying and exploiting a large chunk of eastern Laos, and we needed information on exactly what they were doing. The Panhandle area stretches from just north of Thakhek, a small Lao town on the Mekong River, to about midway between Savannakhet and Pakse to the south. It is bounded on the west by the Mekong, which is also the border with Thailand, and on the east by the Annamite mountain range, which forms the border with North Vietnam.

I was surprised. I had not expected to get a project to handle on my own, and the prospect was appealing. I would be working with ethnic Lao, and the objective was to collect intelligence on the VC. The operation was in the process of shifting its headquarters from Thakhek, to Nakhon Phanom, across the Mekong in Thailand.

The Panhandle Project

Nakhon Phanom was a quiet, pretty town of several thousand inhabitants. Some streets were paved. A general store, a few small shops, the town's only restaurant, and some government offices were clustered around what appeared to be a central square. My house was near the airport, which had a laterite runway capable of taking large cargo planes. Thai Airways flights arrived twice weekly from Bangkok.



Lao Panhandle, of increasing strategic importance to North Vietnam.

I spent almost 20 months operating out of Nakhon Phanom. During that time, no one ever asked me what I was doing. My cover—advisor to the Border Police—was backstopped only minimally, but no one seemed too worried. Without fanfare, I had moved from being assigned to Laos to

worried. Without fanfare, I had moved from being assigned to Laos to being assigned in Thailand. The Agency took care of all the paperwork so I was not illegal.

As the VC violations of the 1962 Protocol increased and were verified by photography and signals intelligence, Ambassador Harriman finally conceded that the communists were not abiding by the rules. Accordingly, restrictions on our activities gradually loosened. Early in my tour at Nakhon Phanom, I would have my team leaders come to Thailand to meet with me. Then, I began making trips into Laos at night. Finally, I began to cross the river into Laos regularly during the day. I never carried a passport or other identification. No one, least of all the border officials, ever questioned me about what I was doing.

Almost all Thais were concerned about the communist threat. They welcomed our support and resources and were eager to help in any way. Both of my Thai assistants—"Jimmie" and "Mr. Ambrose," an interpreter—were good at their work. The sixman PARU team looked a lot like the PARU I had worked with in Laos. I also had a houseboy named Whet. This was to be my staff, and we got along well.

Turnover Briefing

Much of my first day was spent checking equipment, signing the required forms about gear and administrative matters, and looking around Nakhon Phanom. The next day, my predecessor walked me through the operational aspects of my responsibilities, beginning with the location of each PM team and his opinions about the mixed bag of team leaders. Mr. Ambrose, who interpreted at each meeting with the team leaders, also knew them well and was to be a great help in the months to come.

This introductory briefing took the whole day. Maps were everywhere. I became intimately familiar with the geographic coordinates of many places in central Laos—within months I could cite from memory the coordinates of specific towns or road junctions. From north to south, I was briefed on each team that we were supporting. My predecessor, who had started the project from scratch, had been obliged to work closely with Lao military officers, who were also a mixed bag—all corrupt to some degree. The team leaders, often nominated by the military commander of a given area, tended to be former military officers who allegedly had retired. Some were refugees who had been Nai Khongs or Nai Bans from key villages in the

refugees who had been Nai Khongs or Nai Bans from key villages in the areas where they were now monitoring enemy activities.

Team members were all local villagers. Some had been displaced by the communist takeover of the areas along the border with North Vietnam, while others were from areas along the Mekong. Some had been in the FAR. The seven teams varied in size, from 15 men to more than 100. The level of training varied widely from team to team, depending on the quality and skills of the team leader. Each member had at least rudimentary weapons training—all were armed and had uniforms and boots. We also supplied medicines and rice by airdrop. All were paid more than Lao military personnel. Pay was according to rank or position. The team leader received cash and then distributed the pay to his group. Each team had a radio and stayed in regular (usually daily) contact with us. Two of our PARU were radio operators, and they maintained the base station for our project.

Evolving Mission

The 17th parallel—the demarcation line between North and South Vietnam—touched the southeastern edge of the Laotian Panhandle. This chunk of territory was of strong strategic interest to the North. At the time I arrived, the United States was just beginning to grapple with the importance of North Vietnamese control and use of the network of dirt roads and trails running along the eastern side of the Panhandle from north to south, later widely known as the Ho Chi-Minh Trail.

The French-built road network in the Panhandle was sparse. Two passes through the Annamites provided access for roads to and from Vietnam. From the Thakhek area in western Laos, Route 8 followed the upper edge of the Nakay Plateau and headed to Vietnam through the Nape Pass. Beginning in the same area, Route 12 moved eastward along the bottom of the Nakay Plateau and through the Mu Gia Pass. Further south, Route 9 headed east from Savannakhet and ran straight across the Panhandle, touching South Vietnam just below the demarcation line at the 17th parallel. Route 13, the only north-south road in the Panhandle, stretched all the way from Vientiane to Pakse, following the Lao side of the Mekong River. These roads all had crushed laterite surfaces, but none were reliable for year-round travel, primarily because of flooding during the rainy

for year-round travel, primarily because of flooding during the rainy season.

Decisionmakers in Washington had already begun discussing strategic options for cutting the North Vietnamese supply route through Laos. One proposal by the US military entailed fortifying and defending Route 9, which ran straight across the Panhandle. However, Washington policymakers rejected the military's proposal.

Generally speaking, those of us on the ground at the time believed that trucks were limited to the French-built road system for transporting anything in the Panhandle. We would come to know better. Even as early as 1962, the North Vietnamese were building and improving roads between Route 12 and Route 9 that would soon take truck convoys. Moreover, during the dry season, jeeps and sometimes trucks could move overland off the limited road network.

Sitting in Nakhon Phanom, I quickly realized that the Trail was the problem. My goal became to position teams at key points in the easternmost parts of the Panhandle to clandestinely monitor all traffic along the roads and trails being used by the VC after they entered Laos via one of the two passes through the Annamites. To do that, I knew that I would have to train, motivate, and support the villager/soldier members of my teams so that they would take the risks required to move into enemy-controlled areas and radio back reports to our base station. None of the teams had previously been located in positions that enabled systematic intelligence collection. Some intelligence was being provided, but it was sporadic and of minimal use, coming primarily from random patrols and villager debriefings.

Panhandle Planning

Looking at my maps, it was not hard to select the points where I wanted to establish road-watch sites. The Nape and Mu Gia passes were obvious locations, but it would be difficult, I knew, to get teams to those sites, especially since I would be working from the Thai side of the Mekong. But with goals and a plan, we would be moving from a passive organizational stage into a much more active and risky effort.

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During my first month in Nakhon Phanom, I met with all but one of the team leaders. Each made the journey to Thakhek and then crossed over to Nakhon Phanom. These meetings became at least monthly events, ones that the leaders rarely missed because they collected their payroll at the same time. Using this as leverage, I was gradually able to develop a personal relationship with each one.



Rainy season movement of supplies in the Panhandle.

At those first meetings, I spent a lot of time briefing each leader on our collective mission to establish road-watch sites. As I anticipated, some reacted more favorably than others. It was about a 50-50 split. Those who hesitated, generally liked the security and comfort of living near the

hesitated, generally liked the security and comfort of living near the Mekong, well inside Lao government-controlled areas, and/or genuinely feared moving clandestinely into enemy-controlled areas to the east. It became clear that much cajoling and motivating, or team leader changes, would be required to move those teams to the watch sites. I knew that several would report promptly to their Lao military contacts, and I could expect questions from the latter concerning what I was doing.

I decided that it was time to brief Lair and Landry in detail about my plans for the project. I told them that if we were going to get some useful intelligence, we needed teams—with radios—positioned a lot further east. I showed them the sites I had selected at the Nape and Mu Gia Passes. I said that I thought we could get daily reports on what was moving into Laos via the passes and also would be able to identify which portions were headed straight to South Vietnam.

Landry knew little about the infant project in central Laos, but I piqued his interest. We spent a couple of hours going over specifics. I told him about my meetings with each team leader and outlined what we had, team by team, showing him each team's location. I was pleased that he was so interested and impressed with the depth of the questions he posed. Finally, he told me to draft a cable to CIA Headquarters outlining the project.

Approval from the Chief

Early the next morning, I flew to Vientiane to see the chief there, Charles Whitehurst, or "Whitey," as he was widely known. About 40, he had quite a history. A semipro baseball player in his youth, he ended up in OSS in World War II. He parachuted into North Vietnam with a team of commandos, intending to blow up a key bridge between Vietnam and China. That mission was abandoned when the war ended before the plan could be carried out. Pragmatic, smart, and unpretentious, Whitey handled the varied programs with aplomb. Lair and Landry had come to like him, and that was certainly good enough for me.

That night, before dinner at his house, Whitey and I talked in general terms, first about my background and then about the project in the Panhandle. His questions revealed that he already had a good idea what the problems were and a feel for what it was like to deal with Laotians. Savvy about Headquarters, he advised me on what I should emphasize in

Savvy about Headquarters, he advised me on what I should emphasize in my cable. After reviewing the draft and suggesting a few changes, he decided it should be sent to Headquarters immediately. It was late when I left Whitey's house, but I was elated by what had transpired.

Less than a week later, Landry cabled me in Nakhon Phanom to say that Headquarters had agreed to the concept, the goals, and the plan itself. He sounded happy, and I sure was. The new project had been given an official cryptonym for use in cable traffic: Henceforth it would be known as HARDNOSE. Landry and I both thought it was a good crypt.

Making HARDNOSE Work

In early 1963, my activities were still circumscribed by US support for the Geneva Protocol. Nonetheless, meetings with my team leaders started to produce results and I stepped them up.

To improve my access, I traveled to Mukdahan, the Thai town across the Mekong from Savannakhet, for meetings with two team leaders operating in the southern Panhandle. As constraints eased, I slipped into Laos at night for additional meetings with my team leaders to discuss logistics, training, reporting, communications, and team location. Getting agreement to move their teams into enemy-controlled areas to the east was always touchy.

Moving eastward made it even more difficult than usual to confirm team locations and often we just had to take their word for it. Sometimes we could use collateral information to double-check reporting from our teams. If we had overhead coverage of the Mu Gia Pass, for example, we could cross-check it with reporting from a team on the ground along Route 12. Our colleagues in Udorn often did this for us. I was always pleased when our team reported trucks on a particular road and air coverage on the same day confirmed the position of the convoy. Occasionally, independent reports from villagers could also be used to confirm our road-watch reporting.

Food drops also served to confirm team locations. No drop was made unless the proper signal was displayed in the drop zone, and the team had to be there to display the correct signal. We changed the signals

periodically to keep the teams' attention. They definitely wanted to receive the rice and supplies and were careful about the coordinates they gave and the signals they were to use. Later, when teams were inserted by chopper, we knew exactly where they were.

VC Countermeasures

In about mid-1963, the VC became increasingly aware that our teams were watching them and began using countermeasures. They patrolled areas along the roads that they were using and planted spies in the villages in the area. Our teams sometimes discreetly purchased food locally, which occasionally proved dangerous. If discovered by a VC patrol, our teams could only run. They lacked the firepower to stand and fight. In the later 1960s that changed as bigger teams with heavy firepower were inserted.

The VC sometimes used sniffer dogs, which caused lots of problems. One of the reports that we forwarded to Udorn and Headquarters mentioned that the presence of tigers in a given area appeared to make a difference. The VC's dogs seemed to be less effective if they smelled tiger excrement or urine. We had no way of knowing if this was true. At Headquarters, an office in the Directorate of Science and Technology decided to try to produce a countermeasure. Years later, when I was about to retire, I learned that the office had analyzed samples of tiger urine and excrement from the National Zoo and manufactured a substance that resembled and smelled like what the tigers produced. But it did not fool the dogs in the Panhandle of Laos.

HARDNOSE Headway

As the months passed, our teams became more aggressive and more effective. "Stay away from the enemy" was the message I preached to all of my teams. None had any problem with that concept. "Find a spot away from the road but with clear vision, on a hill or bluff, if possible, and stay hidden." "Rotate small teams from a base camp every couple of days, and always stay out of sight." "Move at night." Nothing particularly brilliant, just

common sense, and slowly it started to work.

We handed out cameras and trained team members to photograph passing traffic. We also produced laminated plastic cards identifying various kinds of trucks and other vehicles to systematize the reporting terminology.



Road-watching team selecting observation site in the eastern Panhandle.

From the spring of 1963 onward, our coverage of the Ho Chi Minh road and trail network in the eastern Panhandle of Laos increased steadily in

trail network in the eastern Panhandle of Laos increased steadily in quantity and quality. In addition to the daily reports that we received by radio, we started getting cassettes of film, which we sent to Udorn. Our photo coverage became pretty good. Some of it was useful in confirming VC presence, which led to further relaxation of the restrictions on our activities. The teams took photos of enemy patrols, trucks, bicycles, and even elephants laden with sacks and cans.

As the situation changed, I was able to cross the river more frequently and travel by day instead of at night. I saw the senior Lao Army officers more regularly, but primarily for reasons of courtesy. We did not discuss what our teams were doing, but they had a good idea. They raised few objections, usually indirectly. I traveled a few times to see their camps and strongpoints on the road leading into Thakhek from the east. On a few occasions, I was able to help them with communications support or logistics. In turn, they provided transport, approved landings at airstrips for resupply purposes, and selected men for our teams.



Team leader debriefing patrol returning from the Mu Gia Pass area.

In late spring, Landry had me come to Udorn for discussions. He was expecting a senior visitor from Headquarters and wanted an update on HARDNOSE. At that point, I was feeling comfortable about how things were going. There were still problems, but progress had been steady. We went over everything, including the budget, a subject that I did not know much about. In the field, when I asked for something, it appeared. Landry handled all the financial and administrative aspects of the project for me.

At the end of my briefing, he surprised me by saying that he wanted to ask Headquarters to extend my assignment until the summer of 1964, making it a full two-year tour. I had to think a minute before responding. Africa

Division was expecting me back. But I was enjoying my work and felt like I was making a contribution. So I said yes.

For the remainder of 1963, the Laos program, including my project, made significant progress and prospects were bright for 1964. Attitudes were positive and our confidence was high. The original game plan of organizing small, well-trained mobile units for use in hit-and-run operations designed to harass and tie up VC units was only then starting to shift incrementally toward more ambitious tactics aimed at actually seizing and holding ground. Few saw any potential dangers. We were certain that our actions would cause setbacks for the VC. In Washington, President Johnson increased overall US support for South Vietnam. Both in Washington and in Southeast Asia, despite ceaseless political machinations in Saigon and Vientiane, Americans continued to view the situation through rose-colored glasses. That a superpower could be tied down and ultimately rendered impotent in its conflict with North Vietnam was inconceivable. Some harsh political lessons had yet to be learned.

A Welcome Addition

Early in 1964, Lair and Landry sent a second officer, Dick Kinsman, to Nakhon Phanom to backstop me and ultimately take over the project when I left. Dick, who was from upstate New York, was a Syracuse University graduate and had joined the Agency a few years earlier. He was a volunteer like the rest of us and had arrived at Udorn in the fall of 1963. He stayed in Udorn awhile to get a feel for things, and his presence was most welcome. Dick was a low-key guy and I could see right away that we would get along.

Around the time that Dick arrived, we started thinking about moving management of the program back into Laos. We rented a small house in Thakhek, and I sometimes stayed there overnight while in Laos for meetings. ³

Dick sat in on all of the meetings with team leaders and frequently traveled with me when I crossed into Laos. He caught on quickly. Much of our success depended upon personal relationships, and he established rapport easily. Persuading the team leaders, and sometimes the members

as well, of the wisdom of our suggestions was important and Dick had a knack for listening and explaining without being condescending. This was just the right approach with our Lao counterparts.

Dick and I discussed several possibilities for the future of the project, including one that would move us into a more aggressive mode in the eastern Panhandle. That option would call for bigger teams with more firepower. At a minimum, we would need company-size units if we hoped to mine the roads that the VC were using, or ambush and destroy truck convoys.

This would be a big step beyond road-watching and would have to be carefully planned. We would need to recruit and train more men, and we would need additional PARU support for the training. Things were heating up in Vietnam and southern Laos was becoming more critical, for both sides. At that time, we had no hope of impeding traffic on the Ho Chi Minh Trail and only wanted to harass the VC to make their tasks more difficult. We sent an outline of our thinking to Udorn. They approved the outline, as did Headquarters. "Go slow," was Landry's guidance.

As a first step, we needed a place to do our training. Dick and I went to see the Thakhek military commander. Corrupt and ineffective as a commander, he was nonetheless a nice enough guy. He agreed to let us take over a former Lao Army training facility just outside Thakhek. It had all that we would need to get started.

Recruiting new members for our teams was the next step. We made it clear that recruits would have to meet our standards. Being a cousin, brother, or family friend of a team leader was not a sufficiently qualifying factor.

Overambitious

With our sights aimed much higher than ultimately proved reasonable, we developed a plan to hit Route 12 just as it passed through the Annamites at the Mu Gia Pass. The VC would be shocked, we believed, to see the Mu Gia Pass closed to truck traffic. But, as we soon found out, not nearly as shocked as the leader of Team Bravo when we explained the objective.

Our plan involved some complicated logistics. It was the dry season, so we explained that we would send cratering charges by truck and boat to Team Bravo's base camp. Then a 15-man patrol, carrying a dozen cratering charges, would walk across the Nakay Plateau to the place where Route 12 entered Vietnam via the Mu Gia Pass. The patrol would pick a spot along a ravine or another vulnerable place, and, at night, plant all 12 of the cratering charges. The road would be cut for weeks.

The team leader started spewing out one reason after another why such an effort would not be possible. He had so many reasons that he didn't even have to include "evil spirits." He pleaded with us to reconsider. We finally did, and no patrol was sent.

Years later, I learned that B-52 bombers dropped tons of high-explosive bombs and cratering bombs all along the Trail and in the strategic passes, including Mu Gia. The road was never cut for more than a few days. The Vietnamese did an incredible job of repairing and rerouting to keep supplies flowing southward. Our 12 cratering charges, even at that early stage, would not have had much effect.

Career Decisions

On one of my trips to Udorn in about May 1964, Bill Lair called me in for a chat. This was unusual as he mainly concerned himself with the Hmong program and let his deputy handle the others, so I was curious as I walked into his office. He asked what I was going to do when I got back to Headquarters? I said I guessed that I would go to Africa Division, where I was supposed to go before I volunteered for Laos. Lair said that if I would like to return to Laos after home leave, I would be most welcome.

The offer was tempting—I enjoyed what I was doing. But it would probably mean a career of running PM operations rather than the classical intelligence work that I had envisioned before coming to Laos. So I held off making any commitment until I could talk to people at Headquarters. Landry, of course, was aware of Lair's conversation. He predicted that I would not return to Laos after consultations in Washington. In the end, he was right.

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I left Nakhon Phanom in July 1964, traveling to Bangkok via Udorn. I was happy with the previous two years. I felt that I had been part of an effort that was doing the right thing. Beyond that, we had been productive and successful. I had met many intelligence officers whom I liked and respected, and I believed that my career was off to a good start.

A Backward Look

Now, some 35 years later, I lament many of the unintended results of our efforts from 1961-1973. The ignorance and the arrogance of Americans arriving in Southeast Asia during that period were contributing factors. We came to help, but we had only minimal understanding of the history, culture, and politics of the people we wanted to aid. The discussions in Geneva were about big power issues more than about Laos or Vietnam. Our strategic interests were superimposed onto a region where our president had decided to “draw the line” against communism. And we would do it our way.

US policies in Laos are largely responsible for the disaster that befell the Hmong. Vang Pao’s meeting with Bill Lair in late 1960 was the beginning of more than a decade of warfare and hardship for his people, although neither man that day could have foreseen the outcome. From its origins as an effort to organize and train the Hmong in guerrilla tactics to resist communist encroachment, our program gradually evolved into a direct confrontation not only of the local PL, but also of North Vietnamese forces. More training, larger units, increased firepower, and air support were introduced little by little. But it remained a mismatch. Despite our best efforts, the Hmong were slowly decimated.

US policies in South Vietnam drove decisions in Laos. The Hmong had to have seen what was happening, but they pressed on. Vang Pao, confident that with our support he would carry the day, actually pushed for many of the offensive actions undertaken as the conflict wore on. But his decisions were clouded, I believe, by the “stars” around him—his own, when he was promoted to lieutenant general, and those of the generals and ambassadors whom he saw as equals. He believed that US power ultimately would save him, and the Hmong.

When the war ended in South Vietnam, it also ended in Laos, where we forced a political arrangement in Vientiane that virtually guaranteed communist control. And then we left.

communist control. And then we left.

Many Hmong have come to the United States as refugees, but thousands still languish in Thai refugee camps. Their way of life has been destroyed. They can never return to Laos. In the end, our policymakers failed to assume the moral responsibility that we owed to those who worked so closely with us during those tumultuous years.

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¹ In 1962, we knew them as the Meo and addressed them that way regularly. It was simple ignorance on our part. In later years, I was to discover that "Meo" was a pejorative term that meant something like "barbarian" in local usage.

² See "Declaration and Protocol on the Neutrality of Laos, 23 July 1962," American Foreign Policy: Current Documents 1962 (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1963), p. 1075.

³ After I left, in July 1964, my successor moved the whole base station of the project to Savannakhet, Laos.

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