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## CIA in Laos: A Secret Collaboration of CIA and Hmong

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CIA in Laos: a secret collaboration of CIA and Hmong

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of

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By

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## Introduction

The Central Intelligence Agency have been developing methods to explore possibilities in the realm of espionage. As the further CIA explored, their tactic began to sway toward an Agency of paramilitary. They often recruit locals with long term promises to gain their trust and military cooperation. This tactic has its roots since the colonial era, where explorers hire locals for guidance and protection. However, CIA brought this method back to life by not physically deploy large number of their own combat forces, but to have the locals act as the proxy, and perform various military, espionage, or insurgency. This project focus on talking about CIA's presence in French Indochina, and CIA's first paramilitary operation. This special operation started a special collaboration between the Hmong people in Laos and the CIA during the Cold War. To present this collaboration in my project was to mainly discuss the possibility of future presence of such paramilitary tactic maneuver and the impact of this collaboration in the region.

The most extensive paramilitary operations ever conducted by the CIA occurred in the small Southeast Asian Kingdom of Laos. For no less than 13 years, the CIA directed its native forces to fight the primary North Vietnamese units until the achievement of a standstill. Although the nation eventually fell to the superior force of the communists, the underlying CIA upheld its pride regarding its accomplishments in the Laos territory.<sup>1</sup> Richard Helms, the CIA director, later noted that this analogy entailed a primary, notable operation for the agency. The operation required manpower and further achieved the incorporation of particularly competent

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<sup>1</sup> William Leary, "CIA Air Operations in Laos, 1955-1974," *Central Intelligence Agency*, April 14, 2007. <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/winter99-00/art7.html>.

manpower, despite being dangerous and difficult. The Director thus contended that the CIA performed a superb job in Laos.

## Chapter 1: The United States and Southeast Asia

The Vietnam War mirrored the magnified Cold War that prevailed between the USSR. Amid this Cold War, the USSR and China contended with the constraints imposed on them by the fighting states.<sup>2</sup> Protests commenced in China as the Chinese targeted the disintegration of the stalemate and the eradication of the barriers that obstructed economic development in the two states.

The 1954 Geneva Conference, as well as the division of Vietnam along the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel, affirmed Laos' status as an independent state. Nonetheless, the country would encounter attempted rule from the Royal Lao Government (RLG), most notably from Vientiane, alongside the Mekong River. The affiliates of the outstandingly pro-communist Pathet Lao would manage to regroup, especially in the northern provinces, accruing to Sam Neua and Phong Saly, and wait for integration into the underlying central regime.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the French encountered an allowance to uphold military dominance in the country with the aim of training the FAR (Royal Lao Army). Further, Laotian independence suited the United States' policy, provided the underlying government remained non-communist. Laos denoted one of the primary dominoes in Southeast Asia, which was of great concern to President Eisenhower as well as to John Foster Dulles, the Secretary of State.<sup>4</sup> Although the nation had exhibited little of intrinsic value, its underlying geographical position accounted for its focus at the center of the Cold War that prevailed in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, if Laos fell to the communists, Thailand could be next,

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<sup>2</sup> Joshua Kurlantzick, *A Great Place to Have A War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 52

<sup>3</sup> Leary, "CIA Air Operations in Laos, 1955-1974."

<sup>4</sup> Leary, "CIA Air Operations in Laos, 1955-1974."



according to the domino theory. The consequential collapse of Thailand would result in communist domination in Southeast Asia – and potentially beyond the extent of the region.

The Western RLG encountered threats from both an army mutiny as well as a North Vietnamese-sponsored communist insurgent movement known as the Pathet Lao. This mutinous RLG unit proved to be the army's best, particularly due to its potential for combating the superior powers of the dissident forces.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, the majority of the army mirrored the lethargy of the underlying officer corps, which emanated from the colonial elite that previously served the French but now lacked the energy, or rather the legitimacy, for practical leadership. Being aware of its military's impotence, the RLG feared that requesting that the SEATO (Southeast Asia Treaty Organization) intervene would provoke North Vietnamese incursions. Nevertheless, Eisenhower realized the Laotian anxiety despite believing that once the nation fell to the hands of the communists, extreme pressure would prevail on Thailand, South Vietnam, and Cambodia.<sup>6</sup> He considered Laos as so significant that he would intervene unilaterally as an ultimate desperate hope. The MEO – more precisely called the Hmong – were a bitter, anti-Vietnamese mountain people who had emigrated from the Yunnan Province in southern China. As their population grew to about half a million, they managed to become the core of an irregular force that was fighting the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) until February 1973. By this time, a Laotian ceasefire followed the accord with Hanoi regarding the termination of the war prevalent in South Vietnam. Invariably, under their mercurial, charismatic leader Vang Pao, the

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<sup>5</sup> Simon Montlake, "Do Hmong Deported by Thailand Face Danger in Laos?" *The Christian Science Monitor*, December 29, 2009. <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-Pacific/2009/1229/Do-Hmong-deported-by-Thailand-face-danger-in-Laos>.

<sup>6</sup> William Lloyd George, "The CIA's Secret War," *The Diplomat*, February 25, 2011. <https://thediplomat.com/2011/02/the-cias-secret-war>.

outstanding Hmong managed to evolve from a hit-and-run guerilla outfit into a significant light infantry operation in the regiment.

The agency initially targeted its paramilitary events in Laos to save the nation from the reign of North Vietnam and from Hanoi's individual Laotian surrogate, or rather the Pathet Lao. The preservation of a non-communist Laos invariably persisted as an American objective until the collapse of South Vietnam rendered the question moot in 1975. Nonetheless, the overall emphasis changed with time. By 1964, the primary point of contention emerged from the failure of the North Vietnamese to withdraw their substantial underlying forces from Laos' territory, whereas American-supported military strategies targeted resisting encroachments by Hanoi.<sup>7</sup>

In addition, as the US notably committed its airpower to South Vietnam by 1964 and its ground troops in 1965, American policymakers increasingly perceived Laos as an effective sideshow to the planned extensive struggle between Hanoi and Saigon. Considering this secondary operations' theater, the antagonists' planned ranks managed to reverse the situation dominant in Vietnam. In South Vietnam, the mobile Viet Cong, as well as North Vietnamese units, proved to frustrate the road-bound heavy infantry dominant in Saigon.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, in Laos, the Hmong irregulars succeeded in traversing existing mountain trails as well as moving by air with the aim of occupying primary high grounds to counteract Hanoi's artillery and tanks. This overturning of duties further reversed the seasonal transformation of tactics in Laos. Invariably, the NVA strengthened during the dry spell, typically from November to May, and

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<sup>7</sup> Christopher Shay, "The Hmong and the CIA," *Time*, December 30, 2009.  
<http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1950590,00.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Clayton Laurie and Andres Vaart, "CIA and the Wars in the Southeast Asia (1947-1975)." *Journal of the American Intelligence Professional* 2016, no. 8: 1-43.

gave ground to Hmong operations once the rains had washed out the underlying primitive road system.

The expanded Hmong forces targeted the defense of Hmong territory, notably in the northeast mountains, in addition to diverting the significant North Vietnamese forces emanating from South Vietnam. Moreover, alongside the establishment of ethnic Lao guerrilla battalions occupying the Laotian panhandle, in 1968 the CIA commenced the activation of a contest regarding Hanoi's utilization of Laotian territory as the supply route to Cambodia and South Vietnam.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, the CIA station in Vientiane operated as the executive agent of the ambassador to conduct the war. This understanding of the CIA's role emanated from the reluctance of both Vientiane and Washington to end Laotian neutrality. This analogy would result in the repeal of the Geneva agreements of 1962, an act that prohibited the underlying foreign powers. However, the prohibition faced by the French further deprived them of the possibility of upholding military dominance in Laos. Moreover, overtly performing the United States combat forces, or rather military advisors, could imperil the foundation for a fairly negotiated peace. The upshot entailed that, besides deploying its individual paramilitary resources, the CIA frequently mediated between the Vientiane embassy and MACV in Saigon. This capacity manifested in the preservation of the authority of the ambassador regarding covert Laotian operations and the endeavor to receive the fair support of MACV, notably with combat air missions.

The covert operations of the CIA in the Laotian territory are perceived to have commenced in the 1950s, when US Special Forces facilitated the prevalence of programs central

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<sup>9</sup> Keith Quicy, *Harvesting Pa Chay's Wheat: The Hmong & American's Secret War in Laos*. (Spokane: Eastern Washington University Press, 2000).

to training the Hmong soldiers.<sup>10</sup> The training notably entailed the familiarization of Hmong individuals with the use of C-119s, various weaponry materials, and also other special war troops. Furthermore, the CIA also trained Hmong soldiers to fly aircraft so that the team could secure effective pilots and copilots from the Hmong population and facilitate the success of the Secret War. According to several historical records, the Long Tieng airfield and military base in Laos was substantial in implementing covert and humanitarian operations during the Vietnam War.<sup>11</sup> Long Tieng proved to be a scheduled region that was long utilized by the American government via the CIA to perform several operations during the Vietnam War. Further, Long Tieng was operated by Laotians and was situated in the northern province Xiangkhouang.

Cooperation between France and the United States in Vietnam commenced in 1953, when French colonial forces requested air transport assistance from the American government. The French colonial legislature dominant in Indochina realized by April 1953 that it was losing the majority of its colonial states, which compelled the French government to reconsider the integration of appropriate strategic techniques capable of empowering their military forces in Vietnam.<sup>12</sup> As a result, with the goal of applying a robust military force in Indochina, the French government considered the application of practical military intervention approaches, including the use of heavy weaponry such as tanks. A problem arose in transporting such military weapons from their state of interest to Indochina. The French government then opted to seek assistance

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas L. Ahern, "Vietnam Declassified: CIA & Counterinsurgency in Vietnam." *Central Intelligence Agency*, January 26, 2011. <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/vol53no4/intelligence-in-public-literature-1.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Wetterhahn, "Ravens of Long Tieng."

<sup>12</sup> Sucheng Chan, *Hmong Means Free: Life in Laos & America*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994). PAGE NUMBER

from the US government, which had initially established a robust military base. The French government then requested assistance from the Americans to transport heavy weaponry to Laos.

President Eisenhower at first displayed reluctance to assist the colonial French government in the transmission of heavy weaponry by air to Laos, despite the French government declaring that requesting assistance did not reflect an intention to colonize Laos. President Eisenhower later decided to provide Civil Air Transport (CAT) for the French government to satisfy their requests.<sup>13</sup> The support that the American government provided to the French government in this moment was appropriately code-named SQUAW. With the goal of eradicating any future issues linked to military operations, the US Air Force notably received directions from the government to offer sterile C-119s to the French legislature.

Nevertheless, the success of these efforts was generally evident, even if only due to White House intervention. Further, the US Air Force, as well as the Navy, offered indispensable air support to the irregulars, who bore the majority of the burden linked to ground combat in Laos. The status quo, by 1973, in Laos survived until Saigon fell in May 1975, an act that also led to collapse in Vientiane and Phnom Penh.<sup>14</sup> However, terminal failure, in Laos at least, was not a sufficient criterion for judging the quality of the effort central to a lost cause. The performance of the CIA in Laos was invariably dominated by flaws, but the tale of the Secret War in the territory portrays an admirable record of flexible economic management and sound tactical judgment.

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<sup>13</sup> John Prados, "Fighting the War in Southeast Asia, 1961-1973," *The National Security Archive*. April 9, 2008. <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB248/>.

<sup>14</sup> Lloyd-George, "The CIA's Secret War."

The military assistance granted to the French government further progressed until 1954, after which the French government again requested aid from the American government. Nonetheless, the second request was somewhat strategic, since the French government requested assistance regarding the use of the American military base Dien Bien Phu, which had been isolated. In addition, Air America amounted to CIA front companies facilitating covert operations in Laos.<sup>15</sup> The tale of Air America commenced in 1950, when the CIA decided that it required air transport potentially adequate for performing covert operations, notably in Asia, and supporting American policy goals. In August 1950, the CIA purchased the assets of CAT, a China-based airline, launched after WWII by General Claire L. Chennault and Whiting Willauer.

### **CIA's Purpose in Laos**

The war performed by the CIA in Laos was largely a failure, similar to the war that the US military waged in the Vietnamese territory. Despite being a significant conflict of American history, the war dominant in Laos was granted a fair degree of ignorance at the time and forgotten afterward. Despite the war being forgotten, this analogy does not overwrite its importance. The invisibility of the Laotian war has masked its persisting influence on the US approach to subsequent fighting and lying about its conflicts. According to Kurlantzick, a toxic brew of relatively good intentions dominated Laos at that time.<sup>16</sup> A debacle emanated from unrealistic expectations, egos, and geopolitics. It is quite challenging to recall that for both John F. Kennedy and Dwight Eisenhower, Laos was far more significant than Vietnam, since the United States succeeded France as the key Western power intervening in Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, a primary downside of mid-Indochina notably safeguarding the US ally Thailand

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<sup>15</sup> Ahern, "Vietnam Declassified: CIA & Counterinsurgency in Vietnam."

<sup>16</sup> Kurlantzick, *A Great Place to Have A War*, 87

from communist inroads was its emergence among the poorest nations internationally, freed from the colonial control of the French in 1954 after France was defeated at Dien Bien Phu.

In addition, Laos was further subdivided internally, notably between the numerous up-country mountain clans, who remained largely independent, and the lowland Laotians who regulated the monarchical government.<sup>17</sup> The independence of the up-country mountain tribes could effectively prevail if they did not encounter ignorance from the rulers of the country. Laos became a countrywide target of the outstanding communist regime, especially in Hanoi, which yielded support for the indigenous communist group Pathet Lao.

Considering the anti-communist mountain clans in Laos, Hmong individuals emerged as the most willing to engage in a large-scale fight, besides proving to be the best fighters. Nonetheless, the CIA latched onto Vang Pao, the Hmong population's leader, in 1961, who then turned his tireless energy into a well-planned attack on the North Vietnamese as well as on Pathet Lao. In addition, the CIA-run Operation Momentum further based its design upon the Hmong approach of guerrilla fighting.<sup>18</sup> This approach allowed these fighters to surprise and destroy small teams of Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese fighters. Further, early success served to secure Vang Pao, along with his American handlers, and transform their thinking into the ideology that the Hmong people were capable of mounting larger operations, including actually holding and taking territory. This analogy compelled Vang Pao to demand US air support to assist him to uphold control over large regions, especially in the central plain of jars.

At the termination of the war in Laos, the US had conducted over a half a million airstrikes that left a devastated stretch of land, pockmarked by unexploded ordnance. The success

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<sup>17</sup> Hillmer, *Hmong Means Free: Life in Laos & America*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994). 32.

<sup>18</sup> Laurie and Vaart, "CIA and the Wars in the Southeast Asia (1947-1975)."

of Vang Pao finally marked him as a key target for a concerted North Vietnamese commitment regarding the destruction of his foundation in the northern region of Laos. Washington decided that the situation was essentially hopeless and hence left a large population of frantic Hmong citizens desperate to clamber onto the departing US Air Force transports amid the pullout of the Americans in 1973.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, US involvement in Laos included a contingent of larger-than-life figures, such as the hard-drinking Tony “Poe” Poshepny, who inhabited the mountain up-country with additional Laotian tribes. These tribes notably fought side-by-side with his recruits and provided bounties for the ears of Pathet Lao; he also collected an individual army, resulting in claims that he was the real-life inspiration for Colonel Kurtz. This begs the question of whether Laos was the forerunner of the current style of conducting secret wars. I concur with Kurlantzick, who shares this thinking. Paramilitary operations amounted to only a small portion of the long-established CIA, and yet the perceived first success in Laos assisted in changing its institutional focus and establishing a propensity toward combat in Latin America by the 1980s and in the Middle East in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Nevertheless, the war in Laos further witnessed the commencement of the outsourcing, training, and occasional deployment of security forces to individual contractors. Further, the CIA’s fabled Air America event transformed the nature of the small, individually directed war regarding the CIA station, Bill Lair, into a massive logistical operation, recruiting new part-timers who understood neither the culture of the CIA nor that of Laos.<sup>20</sup> Currently, Backwater, as well as other individual security companies, inhabit key, yet frequently invisible, roles in US wars abroad.

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<sup>19</sup> Andrew Perrin, “Welcome to the Jungle,” *Time*, April 28, 2003.  
<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,447253,00.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Leary, “CIA Air Operations in Laos, 1955-1974.”



In conjunction with this, the most durable legacy regarding the Laotian war may prove to be that American officials repeatedly and brazenly deceived Congress.<sup>21</sup> This description is analogous to that attributed to US Ambassador William Sullivan, who micromanaged the ongoing war between 1964–1969 prior to being called before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee several times. This perceived lack of support for government legitimacy has compelled the CIA to become the “bête noire” of conspiracy theorists, despite going unremarked on by several researchers.

The tragedy experienced by the Hmong people is dominant in their narrative. The discussion of the Laotian government, especially in Vientiane, must possess a minor role in the overarching story, as with Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese, about whom few lessons can be deduced accordingly. The feeling of a larger vacuum in the narrative is further exacerbated by an effective lack of maps that could aid citizens in situating Southeast Asian and Laotian geography.<sup>22</sup> Nearly four decades after the war’s denouement, the Laotian war continues to resonate in American foreign policy as a precursor to the CIA’s centrality to paramilitary events, the utilization of contractors amid combat zones, and the deliberate misguidance of Congressional committees by executive officials.

### **The Effect of the Hmong-CIA Collaboration on Government Policies**

The alliance between the CIA and the Hmong has greatly shaped current legislative policies. The Laotian war (1961-1975) formed the basis of the integration of the CIA and Hmong individuals, as well as the agency’s allies, once it involved the Hmong in fighting the communist Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese. Nonetheless, the initial objective of upholding a

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<sup>21</sup> Ahern, “Vietnam Declassified: CIA & Counterinsurgency in Vietnam.”

<sup>22</sup> Chan, *Hmong Means Free: Life in Laos & America*, PAGE NUMBERS.

democratic and governable Laos transformed as the conflict in Southeast Asia magnified. Most of the American leaders began to perceive the covert operation as less an issue of saving Laos and more an approach to killing and maiming the North Vietnamese and hence assisting the war in Vietnam.<sup>23</sup> Further, Vang Pao, as the Hmong general, operated devotedly, even when some of his objectives exceeded his grasp. Moreover, two CIA lifers proved to loathe one another: case officer Lair and Tony Poe, paramilitary officer. Lair had a robust belief in the fighting force of the Hmong individuals and argued for this in Washington, D.C.

### **The Secret War and its Effects**

The most crucial assets of the CIA during the Secret War entailed Long Tieng and Laos, which were significant due to their geographical position. Invariably, the geographical location of Laos motivated the CIA to establish a site that was unlikely to be detected due to its mountainous characteristics, which paved way for the CIA to further introduce the Long Tieng airfield, which became one of the busiest airfields internationally. The favorability of the place was further linked to the idea that it was isolated and thus had a small population of individuals, a condition that made Laos suitable for the conduction of CIA operations.<sup>24</sup> The Long Tieng airfield was among the largest US installation sites in foreign countries. The topographical nature of Laos defined its favorability, especially for the facilitation of effective training programs. Nevertheless, the site was further surrounded by three-sided limestone hills, which made it less accessible by road transport in general, particularly when the area was encountering unfavorable weather conditions. This extreme inaccessibility was a key merit for the CIA, since the probability of receiving an attack from the North Vietnamese was quite low. The CIA thus

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<sup>23</sup> Shay, "The Hmong and the CIA."

<sup>24</sup> Kurlantzick, *A Great Place to Have A War*, PAGES.

considered the area a favorable region to form a base for launching their war against the communists in Southeast Asia.

In their method of ending in the Vietnam War, the North Vietnamese carved a transportation maze of routes via the jungles of Laos, establishing a substantial supply linkage, later called the Ho Chi Minh Trail.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, Laos dominated the civil war, notably between Pathet Lao and the RLG. Seeking to disrupt the North's supply routes, the United States enlisted the assistance of the RLG's highest-ranking Hmong general, Vang Pao. He proved to welcome American guns, expertise, and money to assemble thousands of guerrilla fighters from the mountains. Jointly, they would attack a shared adversary – communists.

The partnership was successful to a degree. Invariably, Vang Pao's troops achieved a high reputation for excelling as fierce jungle fighters capable of rescuing downed American aircrews, fought the communists to a stalemate, and collected military intelligence.<sup>26</sup> The efforts amounted to the CIA's largest covert operation until the agency funded the Mujahedin in opposition to the Soviets in Afghanistan. By 1969, CIA director Richard Helms informed President Richard Nixon that the Hmong fighters had 39,000 troops involved in active fighting. Nonetheless, casualties were many, since the forces of Vang Pao were utilizing teens of less than 13 to fill recruitment vacancies. This massive effort was further obscured from the US public for several years prior to being perceived as the Secret War, wherein the Hmong mercenaries acted as the secret army.

The Laotian war affected foreign policy to a great extent beyond determining the approach through which the United States has fought since then. In conjunction with this, Laos

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<sup>25</sup> Hillmer, *A People's History of the Hmong*, PAGES.

<sup>26</sup> Shay, "The Hmong and the CIA."

proved to be far more critical strategically than Vietnam. The division of Laos created a loophole for its attack by communists such as Pathet Lao.<sup>27</sup> The guerrilla approach was quite useful for the CIA to claim victory upon the Pathet Lao. The effectiveness of this technique was central to the idea that the Hmong soldiers hardly found the place quite raided regarding supply lines and shipments. The CIA provided the technical support necessary for Hmong soldiers to actively engage in the fight. Laos further received aid from private contractors and paramilitary teams, who granted them a concise upper hand to facilitate their victory against the North Vietnamese. Nevertheless, the tragedy that befell the Hmong guerrilla soldiers further resonates now, even after the Secret War, in addition to being a durable reminder regarding the battles that once occurred. A further challenge entailed lack of error-free and detailed maps, a condition that activated a feeling of an untold tale, since there was an improper approach toward keeping records and investigating events after they occurred.<sup>28</sup> With the assistance of Air America as key implements, the CIA managed to supply no less than 45 million pounds of foodstuff to assist in feeding the Hmong soldiers during the war. The air transport further facilitated the movement of effective troops to ensure the adequate equipment of the Hmong soldiers to counter the North Vietnamese. The success of the Hmong soldiers hinged upon several aspects, including the introduction of the United States Operations Mission (USOM) and the Programs Evaluation Office (PEO) in Laos to facilitate the effective supply of services, such as military aid.

In addition, after the fall of Saigon, the United States abandoned the Hmong secret army. By 1975, around 10,000 Hmong individuals had been slaughtered at the hands of Pathet Lao, the ascendant. Other Hmong individuals left Laos and fled to Thailand as well as the United States

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<sup>27</sup> Quincy, *Harvesting Pa Chay's Wheat: The Hmong & American's Secret War in Laos*, PAGES.

<sup>28</sup> Keith Quincy, *Hmong, History of a People*. (Cheney: Eastern Washington University Press, 1995). PAGES.

in search of security. In 1977, Washington officially recognized the valor of the guerrilla fighters. A small stone with copper plaque was placed to represent the honor of the Hmong fighters between the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and the eternal flame of John F. Kennedy in Arlington National Cemetery.<sup>29</sup> However, the plaque has not done much regarding the resolution of the Hmong's plight in Southeast Asia. Several thousand Hmong individuals inhabit poverty-stricken regions in Thailand, while a few armed bands continue to live in the remaining Laotian highlands after declining to surrender to the Laotian government. Hmong refugees outside Laos remain worried, since they are aware that the rulers of their homeland still hold a substantial grudge against them. Vang Pao has an interest in returning home from California and assisting in reconciling the communist government and the Hmong in Vientiane.

After the resumption of power by the communists in Laos, the rulers perceived Hmong individuals as their adversaries. The primary reason behind this argument is that the Hmong people, under the leadership of General Vang Pao, joined hands with the CIA to fight communism in Laos and counter North Vietnamese efforts. The problem primarily affected Hmong individuals after US forces withdrew. At that moment, the United States facilitated the escape of its individual forces and also the top-ranking Hmong soldiers, including Vang Pao.<sup>30</sup> Those who remained endeavored to seek safe refugee camps in other states. The primary challenges subsequently faced by the Hmong included poor financial stability, food inadequacy, and lack of medical care, since there were no adequate facilities to meet the care needs of the Hmong people.

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<sup>29</sup> Leary, "CIA Air Operations in Laos, 1955-1974."

<sup>30</sup> Montlake, "Do Hmong Deported by Thailand Face Danger in Laos?"

Universally, the collaboration between the Hmong and the CIA was central to countering the communist effort that prevailed in Southeast Asia. Despite affirming the domino theory, President Eisenhower provided substantial support and equipment for the Hmong in preparation for the war against the North Vietnamese. The United States planned the war effectively, via the CIA, and managed to train the Hmong soldiers in guerrilla techniques that were unfamiliar to the North Vietnamese. This action formed a basis for defeating the North Vietnamese. The supply of effective tankers, ground troops, and C-119s were among the top facilitative approaches that the CIA enacted via the CAT program to ensure the availability of weaponry in Laos. The strategic selection of Laos as the launching place for the war revealed the CIA's keenness to plan in advance for the war. The topographical and geographical location of Laos assures its favorability for the housing of warriors. The contention between the United States, USSR, French government, and China formed the basis of the great powers that were rivals before the emergence of the Vietnam War. The effective training of the Hmong guerrillas facilitated the successful execution of the CIA's well-planned covert operation in Laos and its pattern of operational need insights in the future to ensure that the execution of operations results in the minimum possible damage and is minimally replicable.<sup>31</sup> The efficiency of the pattern can be enhanced, depending on the adversary's locality and preparedness.

### **French Pursuit of US Aid in Indochina**

The American and French relationship in Vietnam began in 1953 when French colonial forces requested air transport assistance from the US government. In April 1953, the French colonial government based in Indochina was losing the bulk of its colonial territory, which

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<sup>31</sup> Leary, "CIA Air Operations in Laos, 1955-1974."

reinforced the French government's consideration of integrating effective strategic approaches to empower their military forces, especially in Vietnam. Therefore, with the aim of establishing a strong military force in Indochina, the French government had to consider applying strong military intervention strategies, including the use of heavy weaponry such as tanks. Although the French government had considered applying such strategies, they had not yet determined how to transport the military weapons from their region of choice to Indochina. Due to the lack of a convenient alternative, the French government, via some of its key officials, had to approach the US government, which had by then established a strong military setting. The French government requested that the US government, through its military, help the French colonial government in transporting heavy military weaponry to Laos.

The American interests in the early 1950s and late 1940s did not, however, entail supporting Vietnam's efforts to gain independence trending under a nationalist possessed with communist leanings. Nonetheless, the dominance of active communist rebellions in Malaya and the Philippines and the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 yielded grave concern among American officials. President Eisenhower invariably explained the connection between Vietnam's condition and that of the rest of Southeast Asia via the metaphor of falling dominoes. The metaphor revealed that if one nation fell to communism, then the other nations would surely follow. The US further required French aid in developing NATO as well as rebuilding West Germany, and consequently, the United States supported the failing French regime dominant in Indochina. By the time the Korean War armistice manifested in 1953, America was already committed, in an irrevocable manner, to efforts to defend the French against the increasingly aggressive forces of Viet Minh. The move to assist the French

government was notably associated with a variety of reasons on the US side.<sup>32</sup> A primary reason that the government was forced to assist the French government is notably attributed to the domino theory, whereby the US believed that if Vietnam was captured by communism, the rest of the countries in Southeast Asia would follow. Therefore, Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson had to send troops to Vietnam to assist the French government in combating the troops in North America. Although the US government was convinced that they possessed sufficient justification to indulge in this war, American citizens opposed the idea of participating by claiming that it was a civil war and thus the government did not need to intervene. The idea of the French legislature to request for assistance from the US government was then supported by various individuals, including General J. Lawton Collins, among other government personnel who argued that losing the rest of South Asia was unwise. On the French side, General Ely was the key player in requesting American aid in their operations in Indochina.

The isolation of the French defenders and the tightening of the formation surrounding them represented a critical condition that compelled the French to request, in their desperation, American aid. Nonetheless, the most hawkish regarding American aid were Admiral Radford (the Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff) and Richard Nixon (the Vice-President, who exhibited no political might). Further hawks included the American Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, who displayed obsessions with the crusade against communism. More reserved was President Eisenhower, but he nonetheless held a press meeting in April and specifically proclaimed the little known domino theory for the potential spread of communism from one nation to another. He stated that “you exhibit several dominoes set up, you further knock over the first domino, and what will notably prevail to the last domino is the surety that it will fairly go over in a quick

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<sup>32</sup> Kurlantzick, *A Great Place to Have A War*, PAGES.



mode.” He further added, “hence you could possess a commencement of disintegration that would bear the highly profound influences.”

Nevertheless Saturday, April 3, 1954 was marked in American history as “the day the country’s government did not go to war.” During that day, Dulles convened with Congressional leaders, who proved adamant that they would not support any military intervention unless Britain was also engaged. Eisenhower notably sent a written document to the Prime Minister of Britain, Winston Churchill, issuing a substantial warning regarding the repercussions to the West if Dien Bien Phu fell. At that moment, at a conference in Paris, Dulles supposedly delivered his shocking proclamation to the French government regarding tactical nuclear weapons. According to facts, Dulles was not authorized to initiate such a provision, and little evidence exists to support that he performed the action. It seems possible that in the hasty atmosphere of the time, the panic-stricken French may have misunderstood him, or rather, his utterances may have been mistranslated.

### **US Air Support to French Indochina**

According to Wetterhahn<sup>33</sup>, the French government had to request that the US government allow use of their air transport facilities, which would be used to transport heavy weaponry equipment, including tanks, to Laos, which was one of their hard-pressed regions in 1953. With the aim of convincing the US government, the French government argued that assistance in transporting weaponry would decide whether the Laotian region was lost or held. During the drafting of this request, President Eisenhower led the country and was, by then, reluctant to assist the French government. Despite his unwillingness to offer overt support to the

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<sup>33</sup> Wetterhahn, "Ravens of Long Tieng."

French government, the president later decided to offer CAT to the French government to fulfill their request. At that time, the role of CAT had been transformed from clandestine to covert. According to Leary<sup>34</sup>, the support offered by the US government to the French government during this time was notably code-named operation SQUAW. With the aim of avoiding any military convectional-related issues in later days, the US Air Force was directed by the government to provide sterile C-119s to the French government to help transport their military equipment. Notably, “sterile” in this case involved removing all military identifications from transport planes to avoid their being traced back to the US government. The C-119 was considered convenient because it could transport the heavy loads of equipment needed by the French troops in Laos.

Because CAT personnel was less familiar with the C-119, US Air Force troops based at Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines needed to provide a quick but intense training program to CAT members before they could conduct the assigned mission. In May 1953, the French troops, with the help of CAT officials, held several covert and overt operations, including six means of transport, which notably involved the parachuting of supplies and military equipment to the French forces in Laos and the Gia Lam airbase situated outside Hanoi. Operation SQUAW is believed to have lasted for several days, with the US government, through its Air Force officials, helping to airdrop various equipment to French troops based in Laos.

According to Lansdale<sup>35</sup>, the military aid offered to the French government is perceived to have continued until 1954, when the French government again requested that the US government aid their forces. Their request occurred in January 1954, whereby the French

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<sup>34</sup> Leary, “CIA Air Operations in Laos, 1955-1974.”

<sup>35</sup> Edward G. Lansdale, “Lansdale Team's Report on Covert Saigon Mission in 1954 and 1955,” *New York Times*, n.d. <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/pentagon/doc95.htm>.

government asked US government officials to assist with their base that had been isolated at Dien Bien Phu. Again, CAT was allocated to the French military officials after the US government provided 24 pilots intended to fly 12 C-119 aircraft. According to historians, from the military perspective, the C-119s were to be maintained by US Air Force ground crews in the Hanoi region, which was then considered to be CAT's Bi airfield. The government was, by then, to offer their support to French troops located at Dien Bien Phu, whereby the mission lasted from March until May 7<sup>th</sup>, when Dien Bien Phu fell, which resulted in the deaths of two CAT pilots and the injury of a military official. Nonetheless, the operations perpetrated by CAT officials are believed to have continued even after the fall of Dien Bien Phu, whereby the C-119s were deployed in isolating French outposts from the area.<sup>36</sup>

## **Post WWII**

The victory of WWII facilitated US military supremacy. The US suffered much less compared to the other non-Axis countries, which incurred severe costs from the destruction of land, enormous population decreases, the invasion of colonies, and the breakdown of military forces. No country in the world affected by the war could function on its own. On the other hand, with the blessing of geological advantage, the US did not suffer much due to the distance between the war's primary battlegrounds and the US mainland. After the war officially ended, European countries requested US aid in the restoration of Europe. The US executed the Marshall plan in July 1947 to aid participating countries in the Organization for European Economic Cooperation in finance, technology, equipment, and related aspects. With the help of the US, the

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<sup>36</sup> Lansdale, "Lansdale Team's Report on Covert Saigon Mission in 1954 and 1955."

European countries were able to rebuild. As the result of such close cooperation, NATO was formed, creating a giant among the world with great power, in the hope of defending member nations from future Soviet invasion.

On the other hand, whereas the US was focusing on the Old World, the Soviet Union thrived by resolving its domestic issues among its territories, while simultaneously settling historical issues with China and Korea. The communists were also eager to spread into further lands, to extend their reach in the world. They were focused on Southeast Asia. At the time, Southeast Asian countries were still very rural and agriculture-dependent, the perfect virgin land for powerful nations to shape them as desired. They possessed very little self-defense capability and few citizens capable of fighting; instead, they greatly relied on metropolitan countries to provide military support. Laos, at the time, was the centerpiece of French Indochina. Being surrounded by many other colonies allowed Laos to become a transportation center.

On a larger scale, the Vietnam War was simply a reflection of the larger Cold War between the US and USSR. During the Cold War, China and the USSR needed to contend with the restrictions imposed by participating countries. Protests begun in China attempted to break the stalemate and remove the restrictions that hindered the development of economies, as the two fighting countries occupied each other. China was in a bid to initiate détente among the enemies. At this point, outside parties disengaged and worked toward individual ends, with Mao opting to provide China its industrial revolution. This stalemate created a group of men who controlled most of the politics and excluded agents of change. This enabled further fighting, especially in Laos.

Laos has a turbulent history. The pushed wave in the grand scene of human activities in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. After being subjugated to Thailand for nearly a century, Laos was

then passed to the French, as the new pet for the vigorous plan for French Indochina. The occupation of Japan in WWII was a sign that allowed Laos to realize that they should no longer abide being violently ruled by French for nearly a century and wanted by the Japanese for decades. Laos as a country was never in peace, and it acted as the helpless battlefield of the French-Japanese War. In 1954, when Laos declared its independence from French Indochina, it was still very much intertwined with the fate of the Asian Arena. I intend to explore the very essence and the prime examples of how imperialism raged throughout Asian countries, whether an unindustrialized country such as Laos controls its own destiny, and the relationship between the French and the US during the Vietnam War.

The activities of the CIA within the Laotian region are believed to have begun in the 1950s, when US Special Forces initiated several programs focused on training Hmong soldiers in techniques for use in unconventional warfare. Based on several historical manuscripts, the Long Tieng airfield in Laos played a significant role, particularly in establishing humanitarian and even covert operations during the Vietnam War. According to Wetterhahn<sup>37</sup>, Long Tieng is a secluded place in Laos' northern central highlands, which was long used by the US government through the CIA to conduct many operations during the Vietnam War. Notably, Long Tien was a military base operated by Laotians and which was located in the northern province of Xiangkhouang. This paper therefore categorically focuses on further elaborating upon CIA activities in Laos during the Vietnam War, which is initiated by presenting a well-researched and comprehensive background history of the US intervention in Laos.

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<sup>37</sup> Wetterhahn, "Ravens of Long Tieng."

According to Leary<sup>38</sup>, CIA operations in Laos are believed to have been initiated in the 1950s and became one of the largest paramilitary operations in the agency's history. One aspect that categorically favored the success of the CIA's involvement in the Secret War relates to the strategic, or rather, the geographical position of the region, Laos. Long Tieng, which was referred to as Lima Site 98 by the CIA, was a Laotian military airbase situated within the Xiangkhouang province. The airbase was considered one of the best places that allowed the US government, through the CIA, to launch countless attacks and both overt and covert operations during the Vietnamese and Laotian civil wars. According to Wetterhahn<sup>39</sup>, the official involvement of the CIA in Long Tieng began in 1962, after they established headquarters in the Long Tieng Valley that would be used by Major General Vang Pao in perpetrating his strategic military operations against North Vietnam. Before the US officially got involved in the Vietnam War, they had initially been recruited to assist the French government in conducting several covert and overt operations while Vietnam was still a French colony. The subsequent section analyzes the timeline of CIA involvement in Vietnam through Long Tieng, beginning with the agency's well-established relationship with the French government.

The US and French relationship in Vietnam was initiated in 1953, when French colonial forces requested air transport assistance from the US government. In April 1953, the French colonial government based in Indochina was losing the bulk of its colonial territory, which forced the French to consider integrating effective strategic approaches that would empower their military forces, especially in Vietnam (Ferguson, 2010). Therefore, with the aim of establishing a strong military force in Indochina, the French government needed to consider applying strong

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<sup>38</sup> Leary, "CIA Air Operations in Laos, 1955-1974."

<sup>39</sup> Wetterhahn, "Ravens of Long Tieng."

military intervention strategies, including the use of heavy weaponry such as tanks. Although the French government had considered applying such military strategies, they had not yet determined how to transport those military weapons from their region of choice to Indochina. Due to the lack of any convenient alternative, the French government, through some key officials, were compelled to approach the U.S. government, which had by then established a strong military setting. The French government requested US military aid to help the French colonial government in transporting heavy weaponry to Laos.

According to Wetterhahn<sup>40</sup>, the French government had to make a request to the U.S. government for their air transport facilities which would be used to transport heavy weaponry equipment's including tanks to Laos which was one of their hard-pressed regions back in the year 1953. With the aim of convincing the U.S. government, the French government attested and emphasized that their help in transporting weaponry would no doubt mean either losing or holding the Laotian region. During the making of this request, President Eisenhower was in the leadership of the country and was by then reluctant to assist the French government. Besides being unwilling to offer his over support to the French government, the president later decides to offer Consolidated Airdrop Tool (CAT) to the French government to fulfill their request. During this moment, the role of the CAT had been transformed from being clandestine to become covert. According to Leary<sup>41</sup>, the support offered by the U.S. government to the French government during this time was notably code-named operation SQUAW. With the aim of avoiding any military convectional-related issues in later days, the U.S. air force was directed by the government to provide sterile C-119 to the French government to help transport their military

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<sup>40</sup> Wetterhahn, "Ravens of Long Tieng."

<sup>41</sup> Leary, "CIA Air Operations in Laos, 1955-1974."

equipment. Notably, 'sterile' in this case involved removing all military identifications from the transport plane to avoid being traced back to the U.S. government. The C-119 was considered convenient bearing the fact that it had the ability to transport heavy loads of equipment needed by the French troops in Laos.



## Chapter 2: US and France in Southeast Asia

### **French Pursuit of US Aid in Indochina**

The U.S. and the French relationship in Vietnam kicked off in 1953 when the French colonial forces had requested for air transport help from the U.S. government. In April 1953, the French colonial government based in Indochina was losing most of its colonial territory which enforced the French government to consider integrating effective strategic approaches that would empower their military forces especially in Vietnam (Ferguson, 2010). Therefore, with the aim of establishing a strong military force in Indochina, the French government had to consider applying strong military intervention strategies including the use of heavy weaponry such as the use of tanks. Although the French government had the idea of applying such strategies, they had not yet figured a way in which they would transport those military weapons from their region of choice to Indochina. Due to lack of a convenient alternative, the French government, via some of its key officials had to turn up to the U.S. government which had by then established a strong military setting. The French government requested for the U.S. government through its military to help the French colonial government in transporting the heavy military weaponry to Laos.

The American interests in the early 1950s and late 1940s didn't, however, entail supporting Vietnam's effort in gaining independence trending under a nationalist possessed with communist leanings. Nonetheless, active communist rebellions dominant in Malaya as well as the Philippines, and also the setting up of the People's China Republic in 1949, yielded a great concern in the American officials. Invariably, President Eisenhower clearly explained the connection between Vietnam's condition and that of the other Southeast Asia via the metaphor of the falling dominoes. The metaphor revealed that if one nation fell to communism, then the other nations would definitely follow. The US further necessitated French aid in developing the NATO

(North Atlantic Treaty Organization) as well as rebuilding West Germany. Consequently, the United States supported the fairly failing French regime dominant in Indochina. By the moments the Korean War armistice manifested in 1953, America was already committed, in an irrevocable manner, to the effort of defending the French notably against the growingly aggressive forces of Viet Minh. The move to assist the French government was notably associated with a variety of reasons on the U.S. side.<sup>42</sup> One of the primary reasons explaining why the government was forced to assist the French government notably accrues to the Domino theory whereby the U.S. believed that if Vietnam was captured by the communism then the rest of the countries in Southeast Asia would follow. Therefore, President Eisenhower Kennedy and Johnson had to take their fight to Vietnam by assisting the French Government to combat the troops in North America. Even though the U.S. government was convinced that they had enough reasons to indulge in this war, the U.S. citizens opposed the idea of participating in this war by claiming that it was a civil war and thus the government did not have to intervene. The idea of the French legislature to request for assistance from the U.S. government was then supported by different individuals including General J. Lawton Collins among other government personnel who argued that losing the rest of South Asia was a bad idea. On the French's side, General Ely was the key player in requesting for U. S's help in their operations in Indochina.

The cutting off the French defenders and the tightening of the noose surrounding them implied a critical condition that compelled the French to request, in its desperation, for American help. Nonetheless, the most hawkish regarding the States' aide was Admiral Radford (the Chair of the Staff's Joint Chiefs) and Richard Nixon (the Vice-President who exhibited no political might). Additionally, hawkish entailed the American secretary of the State John Foster Dulles,

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<sup>42</sup> Kurlantzick, *A Great Place to Have A War*, PAGES

who encountered obsessions from the crusade notably in opposition to communism. Further reserved was President Eisenhower. He nonetheless awarded a press meeting in April and specifically proclaimed the less known ‘Domino Theory’ regarding the potential spread of communism notably from one nation to the other. His speech was that “you exhibit several dominoes set up, you further knock over the first domino, and what will notably prevail to the last domino is the surety that it will fairly go over in a quick mode.” He further added that, “hence you could possess a commencement of disintegration that would bear the highly profound influences” (BBC, 2018)

Nevertheless, on Saturday date 3, April 1954, this day went down in the United States’ history as ‘the day the country’s government didn’t go to war.’ During that day, Dulles convened with Congressional leaders who proved to be adamant they would hardly support any military intervention but could only portray their support once Britain was also engaged. Eisenhower notably sent a written document (letter) to the Prime Minister of Britain (Winston Churchill) issuing a substantial warning regarding the repercussions of the West once Dien Bien Phu fell. During this moment, at a conference in Paris, Dulles supposedly delivered his astonishing provision to the French government regarding tactical nuclear weapons. According to facts, Dulles was not authorized to initiate such a provision and there is little evidence to support that he performed the action. It seems potential that in the febrile surrounding of such days, the panic-stricken French may have misunderstood him or rather his utterances may have encountered a loss in the translation phase.

### **US Air Support to French Indochina**

United States Air, an airline that is confidentially possessed by the CIA, was key to the facilitation of the agency’s operations in Laos. By the summer of 1970, the airline had acquired

two dozen twin-engine transports, an additional two dozen STOL (short takeoff and landing) aircraft, and some 30 helicopters that were dedicated to serving the operations center in Laos. There were invariably no less than three hundred pilots, flight mechanics, air-freight specialists, and copilots flying out from Laos, as well as Thailand. During 1970, the Air America crews transported several thousand refugees and troops, in addition to flying emergency road-watch teams.<sup>43</sup> Additional flight activities included nighttime airdrop missions to the Ho Chi Minh and the monitoring of sensors alongside established infiltration routes. Air America further conducted a highly successful program of photo-reconnaissance besides, as well as several clandestine missions utilizing night vision glasses and state-of-the-art electronic equipment. In absence of Air America's intervention, the efforts of the CIA to accomplish its covert operations in Laos may not have been sustained.

The public image of Air America has not fared well. The actual Air America story began in 1950, when the CIA decided to acquire air transport potential to perform its covert operations in Southeast Asia. The central aim was to support American policy goals. In August 1950, the CIA secretly bought the assets of CAT, an airline that was launched in China after WWII by Whiting W. and General Claire, L. Chennault. Moreover, CAT went on to fly financial routes throughout Asia, operating in every aspect as an individually owned financial airline. It simultaneously offered airplanes and crews to facilitate confidential intelligence operations.<sup>44</sup> During the 1950s, the proprietary airline of the CIA, as it was termed in the lexicon of intelligence, was deployed for several covert missions. During the Korean War, for instance, it

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<sup>43</sup> Lloyd-George, "The CIA's Secret War."

<sup>44</sup> Laurie and Vaart, "CIA and the Wars in the Southeast Asia (1947-1975)."

facilitated no less than 100 risky flights to mainland China, carrying supplies and airdropping agents.

In addition, CAT became further engaged in the French war in opposition to communist insurgents, notably in Indochina. In April 1953, the French appealed to President Eisenhower for the deployment of US Air Force C-119 crews and transports to fly tanks and heavy machinery to their embattled forces in Laos.<sup>45</sup> The French argued that such equipment might be the difference between losing and holding Laos. Despite being reluctant to commit the American military to the Indochina war, the Eisenhower administration was anxious to offer assistance to the French. This resulted in the decision to utilize CAT pilots to sometimes fly airlifts in the US Air Force-supplied C-119s. By early May, a team of CAT workers traveled to Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines for three days of concentrated ground and flight school for those unfamiliar with C-119s. By May 5<sup>th</sup>, now joined by the tricolored roundels of the French Air Force, they flew six types of transport to the Gia Lam airbase outside of Hanoi.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, Operation SQUAW commenced the next day.

The operation progressed until July 16<sup>th</sup>, with CAT pilots making several airdrops to French troops in Laos. As the Vietminh offensive, which entailed being due more shortly following weather rather than French resistance, was waning, the CAT crews then withdrew. Nevertheless, the war prevalent in Indochina continued to progress poorly for the French. By November 1953, the French paratroopers managed to occupy Dien Bien Phu in the northwestern region of Vietnam, around ten miles from the border, and set up an airhead. The commander of the French military, Gen. Henri Navarre, wished to lure the underlying Vietminh into a battle,

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<sup>45</sup> Leary, "CIA Air Operations in Laos, 1955-1974."

<sup>46</sup> Quincy, *Hmong, History of a People*.

wherein superior French firepower could be utilized most effectively.<sup>47</sup> Among the several mistakes that the French made regarding the placement of their troops 220 miles from Hanoi, their miscalculation of the air transport materials needed to supply their isolated forces was central. The head of the French Air Transport Command in Indochina, Col. Jean-Luis Nicot, lacked adequate aircrews that could satisfy the Army's stipulations. Unless extra assistance could be acquired, the French garrison could not be kept supplied.

In conjunction with this, in early January 1954, Mr. Washington alerted the CAT of a potential return to Indochina. According to a contract approved by French authorities on March 3<sup>rd</sup>, CAT would supply 24 pilots to operate 12 C-119s that would be managed by US Air Force personnel. Operations from Cat Bi airfield in Hanoi to Dien Bien Phu were underway as the Vietminh commenced their assault on the French position. Nevertheless, between March 13<sup>th</sup> and May 7<sup>th</sup>, CAT pilots flew 682 airdrop missions to the already beleaguered French troops. One plane was shot down in early May, an event that resulted in the deaths of the two pilots. Further, additional C-119s suffered heavy flak damage, and one pilot was severely wounded.<sup>48</sup> In addition, CAT operations progressed in Indochina, even after the seizure of Dien Bien Phu. Notably, in the period between mid-May and mid-August, the C-119s dropped distributions to isolated French outposts in addition to delivering loads throughout the nation. Furthermore, CAT also supplied 12 functional C-46s for Operation COGNAC, the evacuation of civilians from North Vietnam to the outer extent of South Vietnam in accordance with the signing of the Geneva Agreement, which occurred in 21st 1954. In the period between August 22<sup>nd</sup> and October 4<sup>th</sup>, CAT managed to fly 19,808 children, women, and men from North Vietnam. It

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<sup>47</sup> Shay, "The Hmong and the CIA."

<sup>48</sup> Ahern, "Vietnam Declassified: CIA & Counterinsurgency in Vietnam."

further carried affiliates of the Saigon Military Mission of the CIA north to the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel. However, endeavors by the CIA to establish stay-behind paramilitary networks, especially in the northern region, proved futile.

According to Wetterhahn<sup>49</sup>, the French government had to make a request to the U.S. government for their air transport facilities which would be used to transport heavy weaponry equipment's including tanks to Laos which was one of their hard-pressed regions back in the year 1953. With the aim of convincing the U.S. government, the French government attested and emphasized that their help in transporting weaponry would no doubt mean either losing or holding the Laotian region. During the making of this request, President Eisenhower was in the leadership of the country and was by then reluctant to assist the French government. Besides being unwilling to offer his over support to the French government, the president later decides to offer CAT to the French government to fulfill their request. During this moment, the role of the CAT had been transformed from being clandestine to become covert. According to Leary<sup>50</sup>, the support offered by the U.S. government to the French government during this time was notably code-named operation SQUAW. With the aim of avoiding any military convectional-related issues in later days, the U.S. air force was directed by the government to provide sterile C-119 to the French government to help transport their military equipment. Notably, 'sterile' in this case involved removing all military identifications from the transport plane to avoid being traced back to the U.S. government. The C-119 was considered convenient bearing the fact that it had the ability to transport heavy loads of equipment needed by the French troops in Laos.

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<sup>49</sup> Wetterhahn, "Ravens of Long Tieng."

<sup>50</sup> Leary, "CIA Air Operations in Laos, 1955-1974."

Considering that the CAT personnel was less familiar with the C-119, the U.S. Airforce military based at Clark Airforce Base in the Philippines had to offer a quick but intense training program to the CAT members before they conducted the assigned mission. On May 1953, the French troops with the help of CAT officials held several covert and overt operations including six means of transport. These transports notably involved the parachuting of supplies and military equipment to the French forces in Laos and Gia Lam airbase situated outside Hanoi. Operation SQUAW is believed to have lasted for several days with the U.S. government through its Airforce officials help to airdrop various equipment to the French troops based in Laos.

According to Lansdale<sup>51</sup>, the military aid offered to the French government is perceived to have continued until the year 1954 after the French government had requested the U.S. government to help their forces once again. Their request was made on January 1954 whereby the French government asked the U.S. government officials to assist them with their base that had been isolated at Dien Bien Phu. CAT was again allocated to the French military officials after the U.S. government had provided 24 pilots intended to fly 12 C-119s aircraft. According to historians based on military perspective, the C-119s were to be maintained by the United States Air Force (USAF) ground crews at Hanoi region which was then considered to be CAT's Bi airfield. The government was by then to offer their support to French troops located at Dien Bien Phu whereby the mission started from March until May 7th after Dien Bien Phu fell resulting to the killing of two CAT pilots and the injuring of their one military officials. Nonetheless, the operations perpetrated by the CAT officials are believed to have continued even after the fall of Dien Bien Phu whereby the C-119s were deployed in isolating French outposts from the area.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Lansdale, "Lansdale Team's Report on Covert Saigon Mission in 1954 and 1955."

<sup>52</sup> Lansdale, "Lansdale Team's Report on Covert Saigon Mission in 1954 and 1955."



## **CIA Front Companies – Air America**

The story of the real Air America begins in 1950, when the CIA decided that it required an air transport capability to conduct covert operations in Asia in support of US policy objectives. In August 1950, the agency secretly purchased the assets of CAT, an airline that had been started in China after World War II by Gen. Claire L. Chennault and Whiting Willauer. Gen. Claire L. Chennault. CAT would continue to fly commercial routes throughout Asia, acting in every way as a privately-owned commercial airline. At the same time, under the corporate guise of CAT Incorporated, it provided airplanes and crews for secret intelligence operations. In the 1950s, the CIA's air proprietary, as it was known in the lexicon of intelligence, was used for a variety of covert missions. During the Korean War, for example, it made more than 100 hazardous overflights of mainland China, airdropping agents and supplies. CAT also became involved in the French war against communist insurgents in Indochina. In April 1953, the French appealed to President Eisenhower for the use of US Air Force C-119 transports and crews to fly tanks and heavy equipment to their hard-pressed forces in Laos. "Having such equipment," the French emphasized, "might mean the difference between holding and losing Laos."

While reluctant to commit American military personnel to the war in Indochina, the Eisenhower administration was anxious to assist the French. This led to a decision to use CAT pilots to fly an airlift in US Air Force-supplied C-119s. In early May, a group of CAT personnel arrived at Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines for 72 hours of concentrated ground and flight school on the unfamiliar C-119s. On 5 May, they flew six of the transports, now bearing the tricolored roundels of the French Air Force, to Gia Lam airbase, outside Hanoi.

Operation SQUAW began the next day. It continued until 16 July, with CAT pilots making numerous airdrops to French troops in Laos. With the waning of the Vietminh offensive, which was due more to the weather than to French resistance, the CAT crews were withdrawn. Considering that CAT personnel was less familiar with the C-119, the U.S. Airforce military based at Clark Airforce Base in the Philippines had to offer a quick but intense training program to the CAT members before they conducted the assigned mission. On May 1953, the French troops with the help of CAT officials held several covert and overt operations including six means of transport. These transports notably involved the parachuting of supplies and military equipment to the French forces in Laos and Gia Lam airbase situated outside Hanoi. Operation SQUAW is believed to have lasted for several days with the U.S. government through its Airforce officials help to airdrop various equipment to the French troops based in Laos.

The war in Indochina, however, continued to go badly for the French. In November 1953, French paratroopers occupied Dien Bien Phu in northwestern Vietnam, 10 miles from the Laos border, and established an airhead. Gen. Henri Navarre, the French military commander, wanted to lure the Vietminh into a set piece battle in which superior French firepower could be used to good effect. Among the many mistakes made by the French in placing their troops 220 miles from Hanoi was their miscalculation of the air transport resources needed to keep their isolated forces supplied. Col. Jean-Louis Nicot, head of the French Air Transport Command in Indochina, lacked sufficient aircrews to meet the Army's demands. Unless additional assistance could be obtained, the French garrison could not be kept supplied.

In early January 1954, Washington alerted CAT for a possible return to Indochina. Under a contract signed with French authorities on 3 March, CAT would supply 24 pilots to operate 12 C-119s that would be maintained by US Air Force personnel. Operations from Hanoi's Cat Bi

airfield to Dien Bien Phu got under way just as the Vietminh began their assault on the French position. Between 13 March and the fall of Dien Bien Phu on 7 May, CAT pilots flew 682 airdrop missions to the beleaguered French troops. One plane was shot down in early May, and the two pilots were killed; many other C-119s suffered heavy flak damage, and one pilot was severely wounded.

CAT operations continued in Indochina after the fall of Dien Bien Phu. Between mid-May and mid-August, C-119s dropped supplies to isolated French outposts and delivered loads throughout the country. CAT also supplied 12 C-46s for Operation COGNAC, the evacuation of civilians from North Vietnam to South Vietnam following the signing of the Geneva Agreement on 21 July 1954. Between 22 August and 4 October, CAT flew 19,808 men, women, and children out of North Vietnam. It also carried members of the CIA's Saigon Military Mission north of the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel. Attempts by the CIA to establish staybehind paramilitary networks in the north, however, proved futile.

The war was very much run by the company, referring to the CIA. Most strategies and rules of engagement came directly from them, as they coordinated attacks through intelligence apparatus. The war in Laos influenced foreign policy greatly and determined how America has conducted warfare ever since. Laos was far more critical strategically than Vietnam itself ever was. Laos was divided, and this left it prime for the influence of indigenous communists such as Pathet Lao. The CIA, upon realizing this, searched for a tribe that could counter and fight Pathet Lao. Guerrilla tactics were employed, as the soldiers did not find the place raided shipments and supply lines. This was facilitated with technical support provided by the CIA. Excessive bombing also occurred in the city, with estimates ranging as high as 500,000 airstrikes. Laos also received assistance from the paramilitary and private contractors, who gave them a brief upper

hand in their war against the Laotians. The tragedy that befell the Hmong fighters, however, still resonates long after the war and is a long-lasting reminder of the battles that occurred. The lack of accurate and detailed maps also left a feeling of a story untold, as there was no way to keep track of the events as they unfolded. This trickled down to influence policy, with the CIA now favoring paramilitary activity primarily involving contractors and secrecy, particularly concerning Congressional committees and the lack of allegiance to allies once the order to withdraw is given.

With the aim of succeeding with the initial plan, the CIA had to organize backup that would enable the Hmong to effectively attack North Vietnam. Using implements such as Air America, the CIA supplied over 45 million pounds of foodstuff to feed the Hmong while at war. According to Leary<sup>53</sup>, the CIA was similarly able to offer transport means to the Hmong troops while simultaneously conducting photo-reconnaissance programs, which significantly aided the direction of forces regarding strategies and directions. With the use of state-of-the-art implements and night vision glasses supplied by the CIA, the trained troops could also conduct several clandestine missions against North Vietnam. In addition to the humanitarian programs directed to the troops, the CIA was also assigned the role of conducting a substantial bombing in Laos for nine consecutive years (1964–1973). Leary<sup>54</sup> attests to the US government, through the CIA's airline Air America and the US Air Force, being able to conduct over 550, 000 bombing missions in nine years.

In 1955, the US was directly involved in major operations perpetrated throughout Laos, especially after the introduction of the USOM. In 1955, the government also established a PEO

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<sup>53</sup> Leary, "CIA Air Operations in Laos, 1955-1974."

<sup>54</sup> Leary, "CIA Air Operations in Laos, 1955-1974."

in Laos that was specifically focused on ensuring that services such as military aid were supplied. Notably, the PEO was specifically staffed by military officers who were then serving and retired military men and by the CIA department, which covertly supported the hired military. Both the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) and the PEO were specifically under the USOM, which was assigned several different roles linked to militarism. Still, in 1955, the US government, through USOM officials, initiated official plans to provide supplies to locals who were threatened by famine. The supplies, which included rice and salt, were delivered by three CAT C-46s, and by the end of the year, the CATs had delivered approximately 1,000 tons of emergency foodstuff, which was specifically flown in over 200 missions. The supply of aid to this region marked an important point in the occupation of Laos.

As with 1955, 1957 is also acknowledged as one of the historical periods of US interventions in Laos. At the beginning of the year, the US government, through the CIA, had to sign a new CAT contract, through which Bruce Blevins would be allowed to fly C-47s with the primary aim of providing aid to the US Embassy in Vietnam.<sup>55</sup> During his mission, Blevins reported on poor conditions regarding the underdevelopment of technology in Laos and other related challenges, including the radio navigation systems affecting the area, the lack of enough control towers, and the ineffective runway in Laos. The government therefore, through the CIA, had to covertly increase support to the region. In 1957, the US government noted the conflict again occurring amid the Royal Laotian Guard and the communist Pathet Lao in Laos, which affected the peaceful resolutions proposed during the beginning of the year. The government thus needed to sign a new deal in which it would assist in the development of an effective peace

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<sup>55</sup> John Prados, *Lost crusader: The secret wars of CIA Director William Colby*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). PAGES.

resolution between the two groups and simultaneously aid in ceasing the conflict between the two. The US government, through the CIA, primarily aimed to ensure that the conflict between the two groups would not result in issues that would jeopardize the entire US plan regarding Laos.

By 1958, the CIA had been given full responsibility by the US government to conduct covert operations within Laos. The operations were originally proposed by the State Department, which had to officiate the matter by articulating a document that would govern the covert operations perpetrated both in Laos and in other regions, including Chile.<sup>56</sup> The CIA was now fully commissioned to operate in Laos without any interference from either the government or the local militia. During this period, supplies from both CAT C-47S and C-46s were spotted in Laos making drops that would aid many operations conducted by the CIA. Conversely, 1959 was one of the few historical years that marked a full US intervention in Laos. The period is notably associated with two Air Force historians, Richard R. Sexton and Victor B. Antony, who prepared a 400-page document on how the US government would strategically use Laos to win battles.

Compared to other years, 1960 is now considered one of the most historical periods in the US interventions in Laos. This can be explained because in this year, the US government, through the CIA, introduced a mission with a code name, Erawan, which was a covert mission perpetrated by the CIA that later resulted in the introduction of the Long Tieng airfield in Laos. Project Erawan notably involved US Special Forces, who were by then entrusted with the role of training Laotian soldiers in combat and warfare that could be used to fight the enemy. However, although the CAT contingent was based in the Philippines and Japan, it did not arrive in Laos

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<sup>56</sup> William J. Rust, *Before the quagmire: American intervention in Laos, 1954-1961*. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000). PAGES.

until 1960, when the full operation had already begun. During 1960, the CIA needed to arrange several issues, including the allocation of Marine helicopter pilots who more experienced in flying the H-19s and UH-34 helicopters. Such allocations helped the CIA conduct its operations in Laos quite easily and allowed the government, through the CIA, to offer support to the Laotian government, including its elections. The national election in Laos was conducted in 1960, which favored the introduction of communism in the region.

### Chapter 3: Long Tieng Airfield

#### Long Tieng

Laos and the Long Tieng have been acknowledged as the most important assets of the CIA during the Secret War for several reasons. One of the primary reasons relates to its geographical position: it was not easily detected due to its mountainous features, and this allowed the CIA also to introduce Long Tieng airfield, which became one of the busiest airfields in the world. Another reason is the fact that the region was originally isolated, meaning that it only had a small population and was thus suitable for the CIA's operations.

After the full introduction of the CIA in Laos, the government could develop a headquarters at Long Tieng Valley in support of Major General Vang Pao in 1962. During the introduction of the headquarters, no inhabitants could regulate operations the CIA conducted. This idea empowered the CIA to construct a 1260m-long airfield runway beginning in 1964 and completed in 1966. The airfield, which was originally named Long Tieng, was then identified as one of the largest US installation sites in a foreign nation. Surprisingly, Long Tieng became one of the busiest airports in the world by 1970. However, due to tension emanating from the newly developed airfield, North Vietnam began threatening its existence in late 1971. By late 1971, it had launched an attack aimed at destroying the airport that employed over 19,000 forces.

North Vietnam's forces initially attacked the airfield from all four cardinal points, including the various facilities in the region. Through the attacks, the North Vietnamese forces captured several positions and facilities belonging to the CIA. In addition, the North Vietnamese forces later installed anti-aircraft batteries; thus, airplanes could not use the airfield again. Despite the defeat, the CIA-led Thais and a mixture of Hmong and the 10,000 Long Tieng defender



carried out an attack against the occupying North Vietnamese forces. Although the attack resulted in approximately 50% casualties, the troops were able to conquer the North Vietnamese army and regain their positions. Hixson<sup>57</sup> has described the scene in his manuscript, concluding that although the attack was associated with countless deaths and destruction, through the allocated forces, the CIA could take back their airfield. Long Tieng was considered one of the most secret places on earth. The airfield was originally located at an elevation of 3,100-feet in a valley that could easily have cold fogs and chilly nights. Besides, historians have further described the area as being along mountainous regions that completely surrounded the airfield, particularly the runway's northwest side<sup>58</sup>, which was also covered by several 100-foot karst outcrops. The headquarters in Long Tieng was nicknamed 'Sky,' and all operations regarding the war were strategically planned and perpetrated there. The term 'sky' is believed to have originated from a CIA officer who called the region 'the sky' after his Montana home state, recognized as the 'Big Sky Country.' Besides the existence of the karst outcrops, Long Tieng was similarly protected by limestone mountains on its other three sides. In addition to being recognized as one of the CIA's well-established sites, the airfield is also considered the largest settlement area of the Hmong, particularly during the Secret War. According to historians, the Secret War was simply a term defining the approach used by the CIA during the Vietnam War.

Long Tieng's final defensive outpost was defeated in February of 1975, forcing the US Brigadier General Heinie Aderholt to order an evacuation of civilians and other key individuals.<sup>59</sup> The US had by then withdrawn all its military personnel and civilians from the

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<sup>57</sup> Walter L. Hixson, *Historical memory and representations of the Vietnam War*. (London: Taylor & Francis, 2000). PAGES

<sup>58</sup> Kurlantzick, *A Great Place to Have A War*. PAGES.

<sup>59</sup> Rust, *Before the quagmire: American intervention in Laos, 1954-1961*. PAGES.

region except several staff members from the embassy in Laos. Others who had not yet been removed from Indochina included CIA officer Jerry Daniels, who was initially based at Long Tieng. The key reason Daniel had not yet been evacuated was that there were limited evacuation resources, and that existing airplanes were limited to helping locate and evacuate all individuals. The evacuation is reported to have ended after Jerry Daniels and Major General Vang Pao were evacuated from Long Tieng. In 1975, the base at Long Tieng was made a restricted Xaisomboun Special Zone and thus protected by the Laotian military.

In summary, Laos and Long Tieng have been acknowledged as the most important assets of the CIA during the Secret War for their geographical position and isolation.

Laos operated between 1964 and 1973 as a place where the US government administrated the greatest aerial bombing attacks in post-WWII history through the CIA. In January of 1955, the US government introduced the United States Operations Mission (USOM) in Vientiane, which is currently the capital and the largest city in Laos.<sup>60</sup> The primary objective of establishing USOM within the region was to provide foreign aid within the area. By December of 1955, the CIA had introduced the Program Evaluation Office (PEO) to the area, which was staffed by military personnel covertly aided by the Agency and even retired military officers. According to Leary (2006), in terms of cover affairs, the PEO was similar to the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG), which was organized by USOM officials with the obligation of handling military aid. The PEO program was later neglected after the US military become the superior force within the region, leading to MAAG's establishment. Both MAAG and the PEO were specifically under the direction of the USOM, which had several different roles linked to

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<sup>60</sup> Rust, *Before the quagmire: American intervention in Laos, 1954-1961*. PAGES.

militarism. Still, in 1955, through the USOM officials, the US government initiated official plans to help provide supplies to locals who were about to be struck by famine. The supplies, which included rice and salt, were delivered by three CAT C-46s, and by the end of the year, the CATs had delivered approximately 1,000 tons of emergency foodstuffs during over 200 missions. The supply of aid to this region marked an essential point in the occupation of Laos.

The Lima Site 85, also referred to as Long Tieng, was guarded by several companies or departments linked to the United States and the Royal Kingdom of Laos, including the Hmong “Secret Army.” According to historical perspective, the Hmong are individuals from an ethnic group in Southeast and East Asia. During the Vietnam War, the Hmong, who were under the leadership of Major General Vang Pao, guarded the region of Long Tieng with the help of his Royal Lao Army. The CIA was also granted the role of guarding Long Tieng by the United States government; the agency conducted covert and overt operations during the Vietnam War and had the obligation of protecting the region against the North Vietnamese army, who were rivals with South Vietnam. With the help of the CIA and the Hmong Royal Army, the United States Air Force played a significant role in protecting Long Tieng, which was by then considered the CIA’s most important asset for covert and even humanitarian operations.

During the Vietnam War, the United States Air Force played a significant role in protecting the region and assisting the CIA in conducting covert and overt operations there. With the aim of enriching the region’s security, the CIA, with the help of both the United States Air Force and the Hmong “Secret Army,” established several posts focused on supporting the local stronghold. Before being expanded to being a Tactical Air Navigation System (TACAN) in 1966, the Command Post, which was initially created for the CIA, played a significant role in ensuring that the CIA conducted strategic planning concerning how the ground forces would

later be allocated further operations. The Command Post was originally tasked with advising the CIA paramilitary and the Hmong officers on how to deal with the North Vietnamese and the Pathet Lao, who opposed the existence of the United States Forces in the region. The Command Post also had the task of refueling United States Air Force rescue helicopters, which were often used in overt operations.

The Command Post was later expanded to include the TACAN, which were used as air navigation centers to help protect the region against unexpected air strikes from rival forces. The areas also helped to controlling aircrafts landing and taking off within the region. Besides the TACAN and the Command Post, Combat Target was also an important task force established in March of 1967 to assist the CIA in conducting accurate bombing at night and when the region was experiencing poor weather. The Combat Target was originally recommended by General Earle G. Wheeler, and the Reeves instrument Corporation was tasked with modifying the trailer-mobile for the United States Air Force. Other military inventions aimed at protecting the region against attacks from rival armies, such as the North Vietnamese soldiers, including Heavy Green, was a military operation to place a Reeves AN?TSQ-81 Bomb Directing Central and the Commando Club, which helped in ground-directed bombing (GDB).

According to Sam McGowan's (2012) <sup>61</sup>book, Long Tieng Airfield served several roles and purposes during the start of the Secret War in Laos. One of these was to be the major and most frequent landing destination for the C-130s, which also played a significant role during the Secret War. Besides using airfields such as Sam Thong, Luang Prabang, and Vientiane, Sam McGowan (2012) <sup>62</sup>has acknowledged the airport as one of the most secure airfields within the

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<sup>61</sup> McGowan, Sam. *Trash Haulers: The Story of the C-130 Hercules Troop Carrier/Tactical Airlift Mission*. Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2011.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

region that served an important role during the Secret War. According to McGowan, “all take-offs were situated to the southeast side of the airfield whereas all landings were directed to the northwest side” (McGowan, 2012)<sup>63</sup>. In addition, the CIA considered Long Tieng beneficial because it served as the central distribution point for all the supplies brought into the country by the C-130s. These supplies were supposed to be distributed to local citizens, Hmong who supported the CIA’s operations in Laos. After the supplies were received in Long Tieng, Air America took over the distribution to different parts of the country with the help of helicopters. Furthermore, besides supplying military equipment, the airfield was also used by the US government in the distribution of rice and other types of food for the Meo tribesmen, who represented the most significant percentage of the population in the Laos region.

For decades, Laos and the Long Tieng have been considered the most important assets of the CIA during the Secret War because of its geographical position. Indeed, has argued that Long Tieng Airfield was based at “the most secret place on earth.” Fadiman (1997), on the other hand, has argued that the environmental condition, including its topographical nature, made the site more favorable for the programs to train the local soldiers to defend their land against the North Vietnamese government. Another aspect regarding the topographical nature of the region favored the establishment of a more secure site for the CIA: it was protected on three sides by limestone mountains, which made it less accessible by roads, particularly when the region experienced harsh weather conditions. The CIA considered this inaccessibility an advantage because it reduced the chances of attacks perpetrated by the North Vietnamese forces, thus making it the most secure place on earth to help launch a war. Although the airfield was later ambushed by

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

heavily armed North Vietnamese armies without anticipation, the CIA has always acknowledged the region as one of the most secure and well-hidden places on earth.

A different reason the region was highly favored is that it was initially isolated and thus had a small population, making it suitable for the CIA's operations.<sup>64</sup> One reason the region was less populated is its topographical nature, discussed above. A lower population density meant that the CIA could conduct covert and overt operations without having to consult the local community. Such a region is the best to set up a military base since it would ensure that all military operations were conducted securely without having to worry about the surrounding population. While assessing such regions, the Long Tien in Laos should be categorized as such an area.

A different aspect that made the CIA's establishment of a secure military base successful is the support it received from the local people and even the local government. During the Secret War, military operations conducted by the North Vietnamese army were commanded by Major General Vang Pao, who was by then the commanding officer of the South Vietnamese army. Major General Vang Pao, who was originally based at Long Tien Valley, had to consider a strategic approach that would enable him to defeat the North Vietnamese Army, who intended to link North and South Vietnam. According to him, the most proactive approach was to liaise with the US government by allowing the CIA to set up a military base at Long Tien to assist them with the strategic planning of various military actions. Therefore, with the cooperation of Major General Vang Pao, the CIA could establish a secure site in Long Tieng, which later led to the

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<sup>64</sup> Prados, "Fighting the War in Southeast Asia, 1961-1973."

introduction of Long Tieng Airfield. In addition, the cooperation of the local community and their soldiers from Hmong origins made it easier for the CIA to launch the airfield.

Despite having significantly enriched Laos's economy during the Vietnam War, the region currently faces the after-effects of war and poverty. The CIA World Fact Book 2016 notes that only 9% of the country's current population is over the age of 55, which clearly indicates the heavy loss of life witnessed through the Vietnam War, hunger, and exile. Therefore, one of the major effects of conducting covert and overt operations during this period is increased poverty and death rates in the Laos region. Furthermore, the bombing activities conducted by the United States Air Force inflicted a significant percentage of the casualties during the Civil War in the Laos region. Surprisingly, a study recently conducted by the US State Department concluded that approximately 30% of all the bombs dropped within the region failed to detonate . Meanwhile, a survey conducted recently claims that, since 1975, approximately 20,000 individuals in Laos have fallen victim to this unexploded ordnance, with 60% of these cases resulting in death. Such issues have resulted in an increased mortality rate within the region, which highlight the negative side of the Secret War.

## Chapter 4: Hmong CIA Collaboration

### **Hmong History**

The Hmong were the crucial part of the CIA's operation in Laos, but they are little known to the public. The Hmong is a historically agricultural people who believe they are the decedents of the 九黎 jiuli, an ancient clan that lived in the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River basin. They have their own Voodoo belief and followed their great chief, Chi You, with whom they battled the coalition between Huangdi and Yandi, the ancestor of the Han clan. They lost, resulting in the disintegration among the clans and the loss of residence in their original homeland. The remaining three clans of the Hmong became the main source of most Hmong people today.

The Hmong is a diasporic group; their population is scattered throughout Eastern and Southeastern Asia and is mainly settled in Southern China, Vietnam, Laos and the United States. The Hmong's diasporic routes mostly originated from China. Historically speaking, from the Ming Dynasty, the relationship between the Hmong and the central government of China soured rather early, as the first Ming emperor practiced a cruel and intolerant minority policy. This intensified the situation, and the Hmong started a revolution; they were dealt severe military oppression, followed by heavy taxation that left them struggling for lives. They were also segregated and later displaced from their original home to designated areas with guard posts to strictly limit the Hmong population movement and economic development. At the height of the revolution, the Hmong paramilitary groups had over 200,000 personnel. With the arrival of the Qing Dynasty, the Hmong condition did not improve, as the Manchu ruler sought the same policies as his predecessor. The Hmong communities began emigrating south over the border of



the Qing empire and continued to spread across Southeastern Asia. The group that settled in Laos came through Vietnam, where they often only settled in mountainous areas to avoid conflict with the locals in the fertile plains. Their immigration was mostly a peaceful process, and the Hmong tended not to create upset in their new home as foreigners. When it became inevitable, however, the Hmong fought with determination and advanced technologies they brought from China. In the dawn of colonial era, when French invaders imposed heavy taxation on the Hmong, they began to revolt. However, the revolution did not secure their sovereignty, but the French did recognize their military potential. Later, the Hmong were oppressed by the French-designated Laotian governor, who also did not favor them.

### **The Hmong and the CIA Collaboration in the Vietnam War**

The Hmong refers to an ethnic group residing in the eastern and southern parts of Asia. Their origin lies with the Miao people, who encountered official recognition in 1949 from the legislature of the People's Republic of China as one of its 55 official minority groups. The CIA's covert operations in Laos activated the collaboration between United States soldiers and the Hmong people who inhabited the mountainous region that the CIA had selected as the fighting station for the Vietnam War. The CIA agents decided to use the readily available cheap labor to facilitate the war and thus trained and employed Hmong fighters to enhance their competency in addition to supplying them with the necessary weaponry.<sup>65</sup> This chapter focuses on discussing the key collaboration between the Hmong people and the CIA. Additionally, the chapter highlights the centrality of the Hmong individuals and their fighters in the scheme of the

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<sup>65</sup> Perrin, "Welcome to the Jungle."

Vietnam War and the Secret War. This section further discusses how this collaboration forever transformed the social status of the Hmong.

The Vietnam War mainly involved two key power nations, the United States and the Soviet Union, who controlled the events in Vietnam and its neighboring countries. Invariably, the battle between the two parties primarily concerned political aspects following Vietnam's split and the surge in power accruing to the communists' side, as North Vietnam tried to create a communist nation by forcefully re-linking South Vietnam with the assistance of the Soviet Union. After the French lost power over Vietnam and decided to leave, a power vacuum prevailed, which led to the war. According to Leary<sup>66</sup>, because of the jungle-like terrain in Vietnam, the United States faced several challenges in preventing China and the Soviet Union from sending weapons to equip the North Vietnamese in opposition of the South Vietnamese. The CIA thus turned to the Hmong individuals for assistance in the Vietnam War to oppose communist insurgents.

As evident from the origin of the Secret War, the CIA's secret officers relied on the Hmong guerilla soldiers to counter the Vietnamese communist effort emerging in Laos. The collaboration between the Hmong and the CIA began with the leadership, when a CIA agent named Colonel Billy confidentially approached General Vang Pao to command the Special Guerilla Unit (SGU) to push back the Laotian communists. The collaboration further involved some verbal agreements between CIA agents and Hmong elders stating that, if the Americans suffered defeat, then they would search for a new area to facilitate the relocation of the Hmong.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Leary, "CIA Air Operations in Laos, 1955-1974."

<sup>67</sup> Chan, *Hmong Means Free: Life in Laos & America*.

Acknowledging the impossibility of winning the disagreement in Vietnam and its domestic unpopularity, in 1973, on January 23rd, Henry Kissinger, the United States security advisor, made an accord with the North Vietnamese negotiator terminating the war in Vietnam without the knowledge of the Hmong military leaders. According to Quincy<sup>68</sup>, the US retreated and deserted the Hmong individuals whom they had promised to safeguard in case of an American defeat. In the Vientiane accord of 1973, the United States government agreed to disband 18,000 troops, whereas “all the American military advisors prevalent in Laos proved to be because Laos vested under the communist policy. According to Quincy<sup>69</sup>, the United States spent nearly 20 billion dollars paying the wages of the ‘workforce’ that facilitated the Secret War in Laos. Nonetheless, for the remaining Hmong, the ordeal was quite devastating; 35,000 Hmong individuals died in battle in an effort to defend the United States’ ideology.

Additionally, the United States had little success defeating the North Vietnamese. As a result, the Hmong population lost the stability of the Vietnamese army, and the tactics dominating the guerilla warfare were deployed in opposition to the American soldiers prevalent in Vietnam. Enemies appeared everywhere and were difficult to defeat because the largest population of the adversaries lacked uniforms and imitated the civilians’ mode of dress. As the United States engaged in the war, it was concurrently fighting an additional war with people who were protesting the war. As time elapsed and the United States acknowledged the lack of hope regarding victory, the U.S. attempted to secure a way to withdraw its troops and eventually extricate itself from the underlying war. After the enactment of a ceasefire accord between the two parties in February of 1972, the United States largely evacuated their troops, leaving the

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<sup>68</sup> Quincy, *Hmong, History of a People*. 79.

<sup>69</sup> Quincy, *Harvesting Pa Chay’s Wheat: The Hmong & American’s Secret War in Laos*. 76.

Hmong allies to fight the North Vietnamese alone. As Quincy<sup>70</sup> has argued, after the departure of the American soldiers, the Hmong genocide soon prevailed.

The Hmong individuals faced recruitment from the CIA to tackle the challenges of the jungle since they were knowledgeable about the terrain. The CIA further trained the available Hmong soldiers. The key goal was for the Hmong individuals to fight for the CIA as their primary ground troops countering the North Vietnamese.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, some of the items that the United States gave the Hmong soldiers were central to the Ho Chi Minh trail. This trail was a route that facilitated the delivery of weapons to the North Vietnamese; its spider web-like paths helped prevent tracking and destroying. This analogy provides an additional reason the CIA employed the Hmong fighters: they were needed to interrupt the transport infrastructure by destroying bridges and roads to prevent weapons from reaching the adversary.<sup>72</sup>

### **The PARU Program**

The Hmong project amounted to the operations of the CIA paramilitary specialist, Bill (James W. Lair). A veteran of WWII, Lair had participated in the CIA, notably at the Korean War's eruption. He was assigned to Thailand working as a primary civilian instructor in conjunction with the Thai Police Sector in a CIA-facilitated program with the aim of improving the institution's potential to deal with threats emanating from the communist insurgents.<sup>73</sup> Linked to the Border Police, Lair later assisted with distant border outposts. Once the police units prevalent in the regions of Thailand faced attacks from Communist guerillas, it took

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<sup>70</sup> Quincy, *Hmong, History of a People*. 87.

<sup>71</sup> Laurie and Vaart, "CIA and the Wars in the Southeast Asia (1947-1975)."

<sup>72</sup> Kurlantzick, *A Great Place to Have A War*. 63.

<sup>73</sup> Ahern, "Vietnam Declassified: CIA & Counterinsurgency in Vietnam."

approximately one week to acquire reinforcements at the station. Lair has also argued that a better condition would be a parachute-trained unit to handle such emergencies.

Even though the Thai army was unhappy with the perception of the paramilitary police institution, the Thai government issued an approval of its creation. Acknowledging the Army's sensitivity, Lair created an innocuous name for the newly devised institution: the Police Aerial Reinforcement Unit (PARU). Lair took pride in developing the PARU program.<sup>74</sup> He selected an effective training camp in the southern region of Thailand and initiated a meticulous program with an aim of creating an elite paramilitary force. In one instance, the PARU program encountered a danger regarding the loss of CIA support. The intervention of Desmond FitzGerald, the Far East Division's Chief in the Clandestine Service, saved the program. The PARU force reached a population of nearly 400 highly trained people by 1960.

### **The Entry of Vang Pao**

The outstanding Vang Pao was a leader of the Hmong military and commanded the Tenth Infantry Battalion of the FAR in the PDJ. A talented as well as an ambitious officer, Pao had come to the Americans' attention before, in Laos. By April of 1957, the then-PEO chose him to attend a six-month counterinsurgency training program at the Manila Scout Ranger Base. Nevertheless, once fighting erupted in Laos at the end of 1959, Pao was concerned that the Hmong could potentially suffer reprisals from the Communists. The reason for this was the Hmong's past close ties with the French. Outsourcing motivation from General Phoumi, and with help from an American Special Forces group, Vang Pao began establishing a stay-behind force of the Hmong in the southeastern region of the subject PDJ.<sup>75</sup> Once the communists

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<sup>74</sup> Leary, "CIA Air Operations in Laos, 1955-1974,"

<sup>75</sup> Perrin, "Welcome to the Jungle."

invaded and dominated the Plain, Pao intended to relocate the remaining Hmong to seven other strategic hilltops surrounding the PDJ.

Acknowledging that Vang Pao sought the assistance of General Phoumi, Lair decided to investigate the possibility of expanding the program with the subject Hmong commander. By late December of 1959, Lair had a convention with Vang Pao. The VP, as perceived by the United States soldiers, argued that he had two options: fighting the Communists or leaving the nation. Once the US managed to supply the weapons, Pao said that he was ready to fight and able to lead an army of around 10,000.

In conjunction, Lair made an effective impression on the Hmong commander. He then returned to the Vientiane after reporting the contact to Gordon L. Jorgensen, the station chief. At the same time, Desmond FitzGerald was making his move via Vientiane in an effort to reach Vietnam. Furthermore, Jorgensen has argued that Lair and FitzGerald met to have dinner. FitzGerald told Lair that the assistance that PARU offered General Phoumi in his campaigns opposing Kong Le had been worth what the CIA spent on the program. Lair then highlighted a program aimed at supporting the Hmong.<sup>76</sup> FitzGerald asked Lair to write a proposal for the project and share it with Washington. Even though Lair 'never had the belief that they would manage to perform fully,' he rapidly dispatched an 18-page cable. A positive response, he remembered, came back in a surprising manner. Lair's proposal also received support from Admiral Felt and the State Department. Nevertheless, President Eisenhower, searching for approaches to prevent one-on-one involvement of the United States in Laos, was willing to go along with the CIA's scheme.

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<sup>76</sup> Chan, *Hmong Means Free: Life in Laos & America*.

## The CIA and the Hmong in the Secret War

The apex of this collaboration occurred when when the Thai military packed over 4,000 Hmong asylum-seekers into trucks and drove them from the refugee camps in Thailand to Laos, a single-agency state that has been accused of persecuting the Hmong after backing the American forces in the Vietnam War.<sup>77</sup> Nevertheless, Thailand maintains that the Hmong residing illegally in the territory are economic migrants rather than political refugees who require global protection. However, the decision to repatriate them caused global condemnation. Human Rights Watch called the expulsion “appalling,” while the United States State Department alleged that the refugees should be safeguarded from the threats that they encountered in their primary homeland.

Moreover, the incident was the latest phase in the 10-year history of Laos’ communists, the United States and the Hmong. During the lead-up to the Vietnam War, Northern Vietnam carved a maze of transportation routes in Laos’ jungles, creating a supply connection later called the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Laos prevailed in the midst of a civil war that emerged between Pathet Lao, the communist, and the government of the Royal Lao.<sup>78</sup> In an effort to disrupt the North’s supply access routes, the remaining Americans enlisted the aid of the highest-ranking leader of the Hmong, Vang Pao, in the Royal Lao government. He welcomed the American guns, expertise and money, and assembled several thousands Hmong fighters from the hills. Jointly, they could tackle a universal adversary, the communists.

Nevertheless, the partnership was, to a certain extent, operational. The troops from Vang Pao gained an amplified reputation for being fierce jungle fighters who managed to rescue

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<sup>77</sup> Hillmer, *A People’s History of the Hmong*. 133.

<sup>78</sup> Shay, “The Hmong and the CIA.”

American aircrews, collect military intelligence and fight the communists to reach a stalemate.<sup>79</sup> The effort lasted several years and amounted to the largest covert operation of the CIA until the institution funded the “mujahedin” in opposition to the Soviets dominant in Afghanistan. In 1969, the CIA director, Richard Helms, informed President Richard Nixon that Pao had 39,000 troops involved in active fighting.<sup>80</sup> However, casualties were terrible, since the forces of Vang Pao deployed teens as young as 13 to make sure that their lines were full. An effort was made to prevent this knowledge from reaching the United States public for years. The Secret War then had its base, and the Hmong mercenaries formed the war’s secret army.

After the fall of Saigon, the secret army encountered the abandonment of the United States. In 1975, nearly 10,000 Hmong people were slaughtered at the order of Pathet Lao, the ascendant. Other Hmong fled to Thailand and the United States, where almost 100,000 Hmong people resettled. Finally, in 1977, Washington officially acknowledged the valor of the Hmong soldiers. Moreover, a small stone with a copper plaque was dedicated to their honor between the Unknown Soldier’s Tomb and John F. Kennedy’s eternal flame in Arlington National Cemetery.<sup>81</sup> However, the plaque did little to resolve the plight of the Hmong in Southeast Asia.

Furthermore, thousands of Hmong lived in Thailand in poverty conditions, and some other armed bands that also inhabited the Laotian highlands refused to submit to the legislature of Laos. Some signs had been evident that the underlying conflict may have been easing. Vang Pao, currently 80 and residing in California, said that he wanted to go back home and assist in reconciling the communist government in Vientiane and the Hmong. However, officials

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<sup>79</sup> Leary, “CIA Air Operations in Laos, 1955-1974,”

<sup>80</sup> Laurie and Vaart, “CIA and the Wars in the Southeast Asia (1947-1975).”

<sup>81</sup> Shay, “The Hmong and the CIA.”



reportedly delivered their response that they would welcome him back by executing him.<sup>82</sup> This shows why the Hmong refugees in Thailand continue to worry about the rulers in their homeland, who still hold a grudge.

### **The Life of the Hmong People after the Vietnam War and the Secret War**

The war with the Pathet Lao ended with the US failures in Vietnam. The signing of the Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam in Paris officially ended the CIA aid to the Laos, and the US quickly pulled out its personnel and 3,000 high-ranking Hmong. However, over 30,000 Hmong civilian and the remaining of the combatants were left in Laos. As the Communists took power in 1975, the Marxist government saw the Hmong as their enemy and conducted genocide, reducing the population of Hmong to nearly 50%. Most Hmong tried to seek shelter in other neighboring nations, and some were later transferred to Western countries through Thailand, as the UN proved their status as political refugees. In 1975, the base at Long Tieng was made a restricted Xaisomboun Special Zone and thus protected by the Laotian military.

The Hmong genocide commenced after the Americans had left, and the Hmong individuals encountered massacres in Laos. Additionally, according to Quincy<sup>83</sup>, the Hmong individuals fled and engaged in constant movement because they were afraid of being caught and killed. A majority of the people passed away in their effort to reach Thailand, which was a safe refuge for the Hmong amidst the genocide. Thailand allowed the Hmong into their territory as their only place refuge. However, this did not last long, as Thailand did not want Vietnam and Laos to think that it was operating in assistance of the Hmong rebels. The Hmong genocide

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<sup>82</sup> Hillmer, *A People's History of the Hmong*, 65.

<sup>83</sup> Quincy, *Hmong, History of a People*, 87.

occurs even now, since the American soldiers abandoned their intervention in the war. According to Lloyd-George<sup>84</sup>, Hmong individuals are currently targeted for assisting the Americans in the past, and yet the United States ignores the cries for assistance from their former colleague.

In addition, the Hmong individuals in Thailand and Laos have the feeling of being betrayed by the United States for being colleagues during the war. The Hmong who survived the ones who escaped to Thailand and were directed to the concentration camps there, where they were subject to close monitoring for any possible symptom of a rebellion. Even beyond the abandonment solely is not adequate, the failure to assist the Hmong when the need arises has proven to be an outright betrayal. An article published by the Asian American Press revealed that the Thai government deported over 4,000 refugees back to Laos. The effort that the United States revealed in response was a speech emanating from Ian Kelly, the spokesman of the United States State Department, requesting that the Thai government not send the remaining refugees back.<sup>85</sup> A letter from Franken, Feingold, Klobuchar, and several senators to Abhisit Vejjajiva, the Prime Minister of Thailand, further supported the response. The Thai officials were specifically sending more than 4,000 Hmong refugees to death, yet the United States did not act.

The life of the Hmong individuals after the war was not very appealing, especially for the population in Laos, since they continued to encounter threats of being killed. Hmong life in Thailand ceased to be secure for the refugees since they were deported back to Laos, despite the fact that life in third-world nations is challenging and dominated by diseases and poverty due to unsanitary surroundings. Nevertheless, Montlake<sup>86</sup> has highlighted how the lucky Hmong

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<sup>84</sup> Lloyd-George, "The CIA's Secret War."

<sup>85</sup> Hillmer, *A People's History of the Hmong*. 43.

<sup>86</sup> Montlake, "Do Hmong Deported by Thailand Face Danger in Laos?"

individuals who succeeded in coming to the United States encountered hardship, since assimilation is among the hardest aspects for the majority of the Hmong population. Most Hmong do not understand the United States' culture, as is shown with the act of kidnapping women as brides; a few Hmong men ended up in jail in this way. The birthrates are another challenge as the traditional ages regarding marriage for Hmong individuals are during their youth. The Hmong are also perceived as having one of the highest rates of individuals living on welfare, following an inadequate and inappropriate academic system as well as qualifications for their competency to work. According to Quincy<sup>87</sup>, the assimilation of Hmong individuals in the United States faces a key challenge since they become Americanized. The Hmong culture has rapidly vanished as a result. A large population of Hmong individuals hardly practices their ancient traditions since their population has converted to various religions in the United States, in addition to intermarrying into different cultures. The modern Hmong generations are have quickly lost much of their language as Hmong few know their language's possibility for transformation. The United States' enlisting the Hmong individuals in the Vietnam War massively influenced the Hmong population in various ways, both positive and negative. In conjunction with the suffering caused by the defeat, the Hmong also retrieved future that would pave way for the forthcoming Hmong people's generations to live besides having better living standards in the United States. Such Hmong individuals would have opportunities they otherwise would not.

According to Lloyd-George<sup>88</sup>, the social status of the Hmong totally changed after the end of the Secret War. Invariably, the Hmong lacked food since every day they had to flee for

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<sup>87</sup> Quincy, *Hmong, History of a People*.

<sup>88</sup> Lloyd-George, "The CIA's Secret War."

their safety; they argue that they are being “hunted like animals” in their homeland. This analogy was expressed by one weeping elderly woman. Furthermore, the children surrounding the woman were also crying because their life in Laos was chaotic, and they wanted to meet a potential savior. Nevertheless, the Hmong continue to suffer the repercussion of joining with the Americans; they have realized that they are fully cut off from the outside world since the end of the Vietnam War.

## Conclusion

The collaboration between the CIA and the Hmong is central to fighting the Communists in Laos. Nonetheless, the location of the Hmong in areas the CIA found secure for launching the war activated the interaction between the two parties. The Hmong fighters formed the SGU, who fought confidentially against the Laotian communists; the CIA did not publicize the reality of the fighters to the United States. Nevertheless, the CIA funded the underlying covert operations for 15 years, besides providing weapons to the Hmong fighters to facilitate the progress of the Secret War. However, the American soldiers retreated after realizing that they were fighting a losing battle and failed to notify the Hmong fighters of the confidential retreat. The Hmong people later encountered harsh living conditions from the Laotian Army for having supported the United States in fighting Laos' communists. Massive killing of the Hmong occurred, and the majority of the Hmong people migrated to Thailand, while some fled to the United States for safety. Their resulting life was full of dissatisfaction over basic and secondary needs given that finding food and medicine is a great challenge. The socialization of the Hmong people further encountered challenging moments after working for 15 years to facilitate execution of the US covert operations with assistance from the CIA.<sup>89</sup> After, they were compelled to constantly run in search of safety in a nation whose government does not acknowledge their existence. Chor Her is a victim of the Secret War repercussions as Lloyd-George<sup>90</sup> has shown, and she affirms that the United State provided them weapons and gave them instructions on shooting the adversary. Waving a battered CIA-provided M79 in the air, the woman expressed great dissatisfaction with the current social status. The Hmong's' painful condition is that the Americans left them, and

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<sup>89</sup> Laurie and Vaart, "CIA and the Wars in the Southeast Asia (1947-1975)."

<sup>90</sup> Lloyd-George, "The CIA's Secret War."

they have been dying gradually ever since. Lloyd-George<sup>91</sup> has noted that once the Lao Army kills one or two Hmong men, they feel they have killed a United States soldier in avenging the Hmongs' assistance to the US.

The life of the Hmong people in the war's aftermath is further dominated by lack of food and medicine. The Hmong population can hardly meet its basic needs or secondary needs. Food and medicine are key to human survival, since health is the key to life. As a result, the social life of the Hmong is full of suppressed needs because the home government is reluctant to show its concern for the Hmongs' survival. It is evident that the Hmong fighters were misused by the CIA to facilitate the Secret War.<sup>92</sup> The Hmongs' achievement from their collaboration with the CIA was only the deprivation of human rights at home and unfriendly conditions that compelled them to look for better lives in the surrounding countries. Their uncomfortable life after the Vietnam War is propagated by the CIA's betrayal of their fighting spirit. The Hmong people could not predict such conditions given the massive spending of the CIA on war expenditures and weaponry measures, which did not hint at a lack of investment in the fighting effort. The CIA was over-confident that they would be victorious over the North Vietnamese and counter the communists' perspective.

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<sup>91</sup> Lloyd-George, "The CIA's Secret War."

<sup>92</sup> Perrin, "Welcome to the Jungle."

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