

Laos and the CIA: The Most Secret Place on Earth Revisited

A Trip into the CIA's Covert War in Laos

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We met before sunrise, just Richy, the cameraman, myself and Sousath, my Lao contact. We'd only packed the most essential gear to film, loaded everything in the car and set off. Our destination: the former CIA air base of Long Cheng. Between 1962 and 1975, Long Cheng became one of the busiest airports in the world and had a population of more than 50.000 people. It was the heart of the Secret War, waged by the US against communist forces in Laos. Yet Long Cheng was never marked on any map.

Today, Long Cheng lies inside the Xaisomboun Special Zone, a restricted military area which is off-limits to outsiders.

It wasn't until 2003 that it emerged that small scale fighting between remnants of a former CIA secret army of Hmong hill tribe fighters and the Laotian military had continued around Long Cheng since US withdrawal from southeast Asia in 1975.

TIME Asia first reported the disastrous fate of the CIA's forgotten army holed up in the Lao jungles for over 30 years. Philip Blenkinsop, the first photojournalist to meet the rebels, won a World Press Photo Award for his images, yet the US media failed to pick up the story and it was largely ignored elsewhere.



Instead of opening Long Cheng in order to explain what was triggering current events, the Laotians kept access to the zone restricted.

It seemed neither the US nor Laos wanted to be reminded of the war, as its last scenes played out virtually unnoticed. The war, which had been secret in its inception, seemed destined to remain largely just so.

In April 2008 the National Security Archives published further details of how the American Special Forces began training Laotian tribesmen in unconventional warfare as early as 1959. The US Air Force even considered using nuclear bombs during the first Laos crisis in 1960. In 1965 an inner circle at the US State Department vetoed a plan to use Air America planes in an active combat role for fear that pilots “would confirm to the Communists the company's

paramilitary nature”.

By making a film about Long Cheng, once the biggest secret site of the CIA, I wanted to shed some light on a dark chapter of America’s involvement in Indochina.

On my journey through the United States, Thailand and Laos I met many former CIA agents, US pilots, aid workers, Hmong fighters, journalists and historians who told me of their time in Laos in the 60s and early 70s.

Without exception they shared the view that the war in Laos is a forgotten war.

But this is not the only tragedy, this small landlocked southeast Asian country had to suffer in its recent past.

Laos was the victim of the biggest air war in history, making it the most bombed country on the planet per capita, with 2,1 million tons of bombs– more than the entire payload dropped on Germany, Japan and the Pacific theatre combined during WWII.

What’s more, most of the bombs were dropped in secret. During the war, even the name of the country in which it took place was classified and referred to as ‘the other theatre’.

For five years, Congress and the American people knew nothing of their government’s executive branch doings.

When it was finally revealed in 1971, that two consecutive presidents, the State Department, the CIA and parts of the US Air Force had been waging a massive air war in a country next to Vietnam, a country which most Americans had never heard of, the news was overshadowed by Nixon’s illegal bombing of Cambodia and US death tolls in South Vietnam. The war wasn’t secret anymore, but “officially unacknowledged”.

At that time large parts of Laos had already been destroyed, yet it took another 4 years for the war to stop. Subsequently, following the communist victory in 1975, the country disappeared from the world map. Isolated from the outside world for almost 20 years, few stories had emerged from behind the Laotian bamboo curtain until 2003.

It was the big day, the day I had been waiting for three years. Just before we left, we snapped a picture of ourselves.

‘I hope it won’t be the last one’, I caught myself thinking.

You never knew. Even with the right contacts things could go wrong.

The last film team that had tried to enter the Xaisomboun Zone were caught up in a shoot-out between Hmong resistance fighters and the Lao authorities and were sentenced to 15 years in Lao prison.

Not a nice thought. Luckily, their embassies and Reporters without Borders put pressure on the Lao authorities and they were freed after two weeks.

But even a fortnight in a Lao prison was nothing to look forward to, and I had to take any footage we were about to shoot back out safely, otherwise there would be no film.

Nobody spoke for the first half hour of the trip. Even Sousath, usually a talkative man, was

subdued. He had told me the night before, that he couldn't be hundred per cent sure that we'd make it to Long Cheng.

Ever since Long Cheng was built, the air base has been off-limits to the outside world. "For a period in history it was the most secret place on earth", Chris Robbins writes in his account of the Secret War, *The Ravens*.

Long Cheng was the physical heart of the largest covert operation the CIA had ever conducted. In its heyday, the remote valley served as the main air hub for clandestine supply and bombing missions against the communist Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese Army which the CIA ran with a proxy army of 30,000 Hmong guerrillas commanded by a young Hmong general, Vang Pao.

Image on the right: Bomb craters in northern Laos (Source: Legacies of War)



What's more, Long Cheng became a major distribution centre of the international opium and heroin traffic.

"Hmm. Maybe difficult to go there," Sousath had said when I'd first met him in 2002 to ask for his help.

"You have to wait for the right time."

Finally, after many attempts to make contact with the right person at the right desk in the Laotian administration, the time had come and we were on the road.

Today, the scars of war are visible everywhere in northern and eastern Laos. Huge bomb craters dot the landscape; houses are built from war scrap. People continue to be killed and maimed by UXO. Many decades after the war ended, its leftovers still take their toll.

"What had started as a low-key air supported guerrilla war turned into something completely different," claims Fred Branfman.

In 1969 Branfman was an aid worker for USAID in Laos when he heard about the secret US bombing campaign from refugees who had come to the Laotian capital from the Plain of Jars in northern Laos.

Shocked that an entire air campaign could be kept secret from the world for five years Branfman interviewed over 2,000 refugees from the Plain of Jars and the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

His collection of eyewitness accounts was later published as *Voices from the Plain of Jars* and is a collection of essays and drawings that tell about unimaginable atrocities.

In order to verify the refugees' accounts, Branfman visited the war room of the US airbase in Nakhon Phanom, Thailand. Here he spoke to the bombing officer in charge, who admitted that the Air Force didn't always check for civilians before they gave permission to bomb.

Collecting evidence, Branfman recorded pilot radio frequencies with conversations that backed up his claims and journalist Sydney Shanberg published Branfman's account in *The New York Times*

Yet, the bombing continued.

Branfman is still angry, when he talks about events that happened over 40 years ago: “The stories I was hearing from the refugees, reminded me of an aerial hunting safari, only that we slaughtered herds of people instead of animals! In many ways the secret war in Laos is the progenitor of warfare in the 21st century. Think about it, an automated air war of a high-tech battlefield in the sky above one of the least developed nations on earth. The executive branch of the US taking war making into its own hands, excluding Congress and the press and the American people, outsourcing the war effort so as not to be accountable for their actions.”

Image below: Fences made of clusterbomb casings (Source: Legacies of War)



During the film shoot I spoke to many Laotians who expressed with calm voices what they had seen.

“The bombs fell like the monsoon, we could only farm at night” remembers a farmer from Phonsavan.

“The first time I saw a plane I thought it was a god, and then it spew fire and I was very scared. There was even fire in the river and all the fish were dead.”

One grandmother, involuntarily mimicking a weapons buff, tells me of T-28 training bombers, supersonic F-4 Phantom jets, cluster bombs, napalm, 500 pound bombs, 750 pound bombs, and the ultimate horror, B52 arclight strikes. “You cannot hear the bombers, but suddenly the whole world around you explodes. At first we didn’t even know who was doing this to us, where they were coming from, and why they wanted to kill us.”

In the first years of John F Kennedy’s presidency, few people saw Vietnam as the source of any major international crisis. Instead, it was Laos that seemed the mostly likely scene of superpower conflict and regional unrest. In 1954, after the Indochina war had ended and the French had left, Laos was declared neutral in Geneva. However, the left wing forces of the Pathet Lao, who had withdrawn to two northern provinces under the Geneva Agreement, were still armed and regarded a potential threat to US security.

At the heart of Kennedy’s doctrine lay the US mission to fight for freedom and keep a perceived global onslaught by the communist bloc at bay. In order to be able to gain political leverage on the global stage, intelligence was spiced up and distorted by the US executive branch. Kennedy devoted an entire press conference on Laos during which he presented a fake map which omitted CIA allied Hmong forces in the hills around Long Cheng and alleged an illegal takeover of northeast Laos by North Vietnamese troops.

In 1962 Laos was declared neutral once more and both the US and the Soviet Union withdrew all military advisors. From then on, stories in the US media about Laos’ military struggles were supplemented by reports about the human aid program the US was conducting in Laos and the war unfolded in secret.

As early as 1960, the CIA had started secretly supplying and training a guerrilla army of ethnic Hmong in the hills around the Plain of Jars, confirms Hmong General Vang Pao.

“Bill Lair and a Thai general came to see me and asked me what I needed to fight the communists. I told them 5000 guns and food and radios. We didn’t even talk about money then! We hated the communists, we embraced democracy.”

Until June 4, 2007 Vang Pao, who was evacuated from Long Cheng in 1975 and later emigrated to the US, preached the Hmong dream of a return to a Laos free of communism to thousands of his expatriate fellow fighters.

Then Federal agents arrested the former general and eight other Hmong in California, along with a former US Army Ranger who had once been involved in covert operations in Vietnam, and charged them with plotting terrorist attacks.

Allegedly the group had conspired to smuggle hundreds of AK-47s, C-4 plastic explosives and Stinger missiles to Vang Pao’s Hmong insurgents into Laos in order to overthrow the Laotian government. In a spectacular assault, the carnage of which would have rivaled 9/11, their operation manuals claimed, government buildings in the Laotian capital were to be bombed.

Up to this point, the US media have presented Hmong general Vang Pao as a decorated war hero, who had helped America during the Vietnam War.

Earlier last year, the school board of Madison named an elementary school after the Hmong General, only to reverse their decision after the arrest.

Five years ago when a park in Madison, Wisconsin was to be named after Vang Pao, a University Professor objected publicly: Alfred McCoy, whose book, *The Politics of Heroin: CIA Complicity in the Global Drug Trade* is considered a landmark study, in part on the Secret War in Laos. Vang Pao happens to be a major character in McCoy’s book, which suggests that the Hmong leader had once played a central role in the international heroin trade, trafficking opium and heroin from laboratories in Long Cheng to South Vietnam. Towards the end of the war one third of the entire US army in South Vietnam had become addicted to heroin.

In Laos, while researching the narcotics trail, McCoy witnessed how Vang Pao recruited children for his secret army by starving their villages or threatening to bomb them, if parents would not provide their boys.

“Vang Pao had the power to do so, because he controlled all the air power out of Long Cheng,” says McCoy.

Air America – at the time the biggest commercial airline in the world – was officially running the aid mission in Laos and was secretly owned by the CIA – a fact unknown at the time. Working closely with Vang Pao, Air America provided the rice and weapons drops for the Hmong villages across Laos and flew soldiers of the CIA’s secret army into battle. CIA agents under USAID and Air America cover oversaw and coordinated the fighting. Towards the end of the war, when most Hmong men of fighting age had been killed, 30,000 Thai mercenaries were flown into Laos by the CIA.

Because of his strong ties to the agency, however, Vang Pao never faced any threat of arrest for his ties to the drug trade, McCoy writes. Perhaps the former general’s legendary impunity explains why he might have gotten involved in a harebrained scheme to overthrow the Communist regime in Laos, an effort that US federal agents posing as gun dealers

immediately infiltrated. Had the scheme gone forward, it would have stood virtually no chance of succeeding. During an interview with Vang Pao several months before his arrest, I told him of my plan to go to Long Cheng. A brief smile crosses his hardened face. "I'd like to go back there myself, but I can't, nobody can go, there is still fighting there. The Lao government won't let any outsider see it."

When we reach Xaisomboun, the capital of the former military zone, soldiers with AK 47s patrol the market square, surrounded by dilapidated wooden shacks. The ground is muddy.

"Just like Texas some time ago." Sousath remarks half-seriously. Trucks of soldiers come and go, buses leave for surrounding villages, and it feels as if we have reached a frontier of some sorts.

In Xaisomboun, electricity is readily available, but in the hinterland there is only rural Laos. As it gets dark, we meet the regional army commander for drinks. He confirms that there are still renegade Hmong hiding in the surrounding hills and claims that the Lao army does not shoot at them.

"Why should we kill our own people? I am Hmong myself."

We both know that the refugees in the camps behind the Thai border tell a different story.

The governor of the Xaisomboun Zone joins us. A small soft-spoken lowland Lao in his mid-fifties, he happily chats away in a low voice and offers to guide us into Long Cheng with an armed escort, just to make sure.

At the crack of dawn we're on the road. The sky is gunmetal grey and we are speeding along a bumpy dirt road. Long Cheng lies 80 km further into the jungle.

I was surprised how candidly some former CIA agents spoke to me about the political and covert moves of the US government in the 50s and 60s in order to bring Lao politics under American control. Such moves included the rigging of elections and supporting coup d'états by secretly providing weapons to competing army generals. Even competing schemes of the CIA and State Department about who should be Prime Minister in Laos were laid out before me. In no time, the formerly neutralist Laotian Prime Minister was leaning so far to the US side, that Laotian neutrality had become a farce.

Declassified memos show that in 1964 President Lyndon Johnson demanded jets of the US Air Force to fly lower on their "aerial reconnaissance flights" over Laos in order to provoke ground fire.

"What has become clear and was admitted publicly by US embassy officials in Laos later on, is that the aerial reconnaissance flights were just a military euphemism for bombing runs in search of targets of opportunity" says Fred Branfman.

"There was a gradual build up and the real heavy bombardments started after President Johnson had declared a bombing halt over North Vietnam in November 1968 and diverted the planes into Laos because, to quote Monteagle Sterns, a U.S. Embassy official, 'we couldn't just let the planes sit there.'"

The ugly truth is, that during the war the US used Laos as a testing ground for their new weapons arsenal: All kinds of cluster bombs, millions of galloons of defoliants, laser guided

missiles to hit people hiding in caves, helicopter gun ships with electronic mini-guns that fired 5,000 rounds a minute, equipped with people sniffers, which detected mammal urine on the ground and shoot at everything that moves in the night – buffaloes, refugees and soldiers alike. The aerial bombardment carried on for five years around the clock, until Congress learned about its own government's activities. It took two more years for Congress to realise that over 100,000 refugees from northern Laos were the result of secret US bombings and it took another two years until 1973, when the large scale bombing was stopped. By then, 700,000 people had become refugees and hundreds of thousands had been killed and wounded – out of a population of 3 million. For Laos, this meant total catastrophe.

When we get to Long Cheng, it's plain to see that the CIA's golden age has passed. Once a high-tech oasis in the jungle with allegedly more antennas than trees, the village is now derelict. A few Lao troops are stationed here in what looks like another village in the middle of nowhere. The CIA buildings lie in ruins and a few cows feed off overgrown parts of the runway. Vang Pao's house is sealed off.

We drive to the end of the runway. From here the landing strip looks like an aircraft carrier rammed right into the mountain. It's a sight that I have come across many times studying old photos in US archives. In my mind, the runway has become an icon of the covert war. Dark clouds hang low over the karst formations.

As I look back over the tarmac across the valley of Long Cheng Alfred McCoy's words echo in my mind:" If the United States is guilty of war crimes, not just mad minutes of soldiers in Vietnam breaking down under stress, but systemic war crimes of policy by commanders, that war crime was the bombing of northern Laos. We destroyed a whole civilization; we wiped it off the map. We incinerated, atomised human remains in this air war and what happened in the end? We lost!"

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