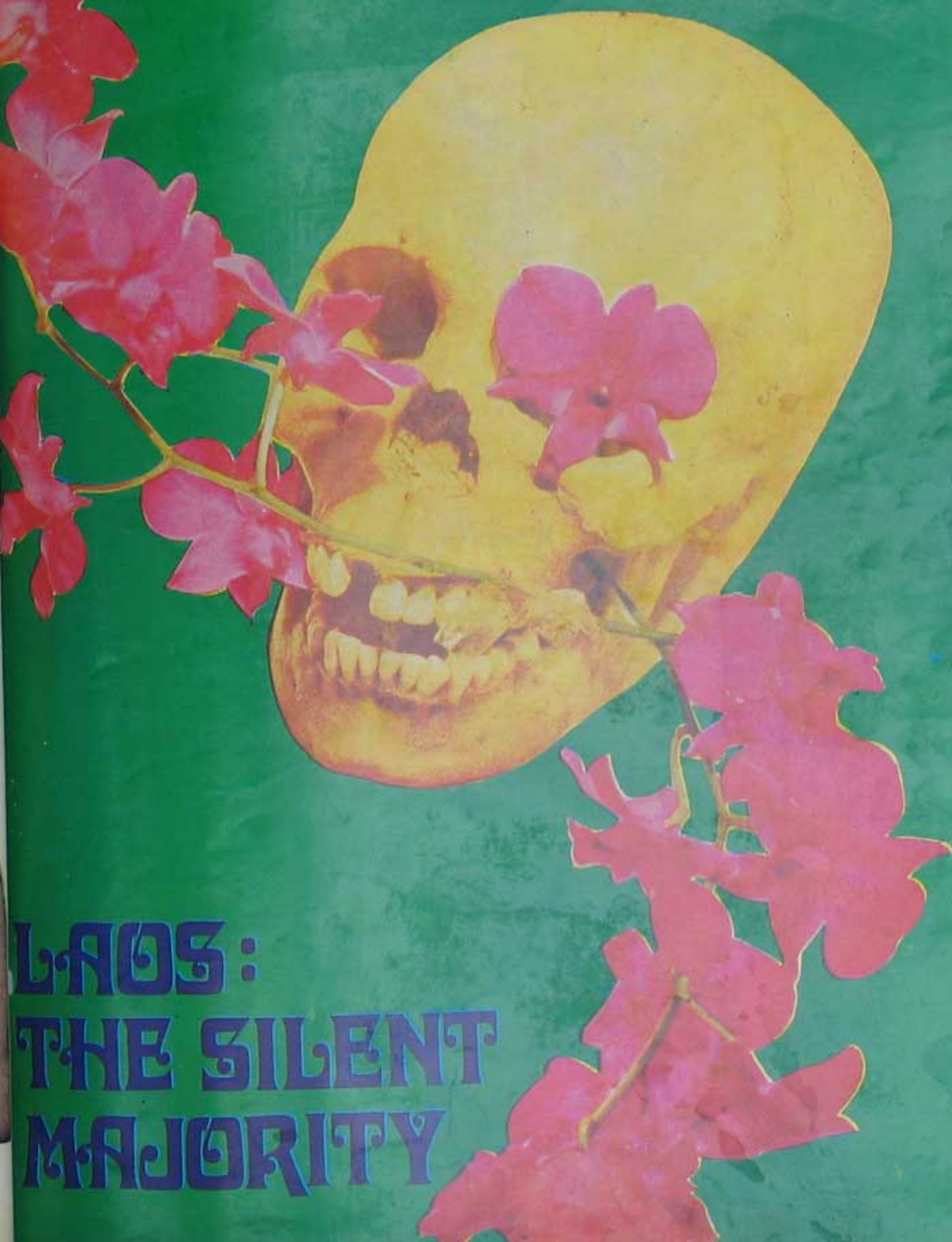


STANDARD

bangkok magazine

August 9, 1970



LAOS:
THE SILENT
MAJORITY



YOU CAN FORGET ABOUT GOING HOME

By Boyd-Weibel Special Correspondent

Question: "Do you think the war in Laos will end in the foreseeable future, and the refugees can go home again?" Answer: "I personally don't think that given any agreement in Paris or any settlement of the Vietnam war, you will not see the immediate effect of this here in Laos. I think we will continue to have our Pathet Lao skirmishes, our ambushes against the Government. But maybe in time we can have a peace of our own."

-USAID Refugee officer, Vientiane.

In time, a peace of our own. How much time? What kind of peace? Another American official says pessimistically, "Maybe in ten

years." Peace in Laos.

No matter who you talk to, the answer is almost always the same. They might as well forget about going home.

Who are "they"? They are the 250,000 refugees of the Laotian war—Lao, Meo, Lu, others—who had the unfortunate luck of being born on or near the Ho Chi Minh trail in the little kingdom of Laos that has become a highway between two warring armies.

In the fall of 1969, the Royal Lao Government, backed by American air strikes, took the Plain des Jarres from the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese. It came as a surprise to everyone.

But in the spring of 1970 the communists decided to take it back.

In the middle of this gathering storm up on the Plain was a village. The

name of the village was Taesseng Sene Noy. Twenty-nine families lived in this small village, whose "puyai" baan" was a young man named Sankhamsing.

To stop the Communist advance on the Plain des Jarres, the Royal Lao Government was counting on massive American airstrikes.

But what do you do with people like Sankhamsing?

They're going to get in the way. What you need is a free-fire zone where anyone down below is automatically the enemy. Then when the Communists return...

The people of Taesseng Sene Noy had to go. And they did.

Giant C130 Caribou transport planes were rushed in from Okinawa by USAID/LAOS to clear the battlefield.

In one week, from Feb. 4 to Feb.

COLOR PICTURES: The silent majority. The girl by the riverbank in Vang Vieng is their symbol: born a refugee, she is totally mute...



10, 25,000 refugees were flown to the Plain des Jarres in one continuous, gigantic airlift.

And while the Americans and the North Vietnamese, the Pathet Lao and the Royal Lao Government fought over the deserted village that was once Taesseng Sene Noy, Sankhamsing and his people have turned up in a new place.

If you want you can find them under the heading "USAID Refugee Status Report (June 26, 1970)." They're one of those numbers in the columns there.

Or you can find them in Mahkha.

- What is your name?
- My name is Sankhamsing.

(continued on Page 2)



The huge rice bags tumbled out the bomb bay onto a white-marked field. A small girl waved from her hut nearby.



RICE DROP OVER LUANG PRABANG

By A.A. MAYTREE

Special Correspondent

another little dot. Distance, again, around 20-25 km.

East? His finger stops at a line of mountains nearby. West? Plus or minus ten kilometers.

A man could get claustrophobia in a place like this.

Not that you're guaranteed to be killed beyond these limits, he explains with a hint of a smile. These limits are official USAID policy. You're pretty safe if you stay inside them.

While we talk, outside Paul's office the dark grey rain clouds are piling up against the mountains ringing Luang Prabang and dulling the afternoon light.

The monsoon season has arrived and, with it, the rain. The first drops go "plug!" "plug!" smothered by the dust on the road, but pretty soon it's lashing down in torrents, turning the fine dust into a sea of mud, making soldier's shoes rot, clothes mildew and miring heavy trucks in a red quagmire.

Two soldiers pedal by, caps down over their eyes, clothes dripping wet, soaked to the bone, their oiled rifles across their backs.

What if we can't get out of Luang Prabang tomorrow, I think. If the weather is bad we might not make it back in time for the rice drop. Even if the plane is 15 minutes late....

I explain the dilemma to Paul. Stay an extra day and I'll set up a rice drop for you here, he offers.

We accept. We will meet here tomorrow morning at 8:30.

5 a.m. The Fourth of July, American Independence Day. As I roll out of bed I try to imagine the speeches they'll be giving today in America. "My fellow Americans...today...in the jungles of Southeast Asia...on the other side of the world...for justice... for freedom... that tiny nation...if we don't...San Francisco... Thank you."

Outside the hotel the sun is trying to pierce the grey morning mist which lies on the town like April in New England. A soldier comes out of the morning market carrying two brown chickens upside down by their feet. Everything is quiet.

When we reach AID headquarters, Paul tells us the flight has been cancelled.

Bad weather. Poor visibility. Damn. Think it will clear by afternoon, we ask? He thinks maybe by 3 p.m.

We're frustrated, disappointed. We go back to a cafe and have breakfast and stare at the sky. By noon the rain has stopped. The day is still cloudy but visibility is up. The flight is on again.

Paul drives us out to the airport and drops us off at the commercial end of the field. They don't allow people with cameras near the Air

Air America pilots flying in Laos are supposed to be something out of Terry and the Pirates: a wild, brawling daredevil bunch of airborne mercenaries. People you don't cross.

They're the ones who fly the rice in and the refugees out of the mountainous no-man's-land that is a lot of northern Laos today. They fly the supply missions here, including arms and ammunition drops to Government forces fighting in the mountains.

The Air America office doesn't accept bookings. They're not looking for business.

Several months ago, during the fall of the Plain des Jarres to the communists, two unfortunate travelers showed up at the Air America operations building in Luang Prabang looking for a ride to Vientiane.

The place was in an uproar. Laotian soldiers, Meo tribesmen, refugees, and old ladies were milling around and people were rushing here and there. They walked in and asked someone if they could speak to one of the pilots.

A few minutes later a pilot appeared and let them have it.

"What are you doing here," he barked.

The two travelers gulped, then one of them started out timidly. "We were wondering if..."

The pilot looked at them and pointed outside.

There ain't no wondering about it. You walk out this f----- door, and you turn right or you turn left, but whichever way you turn, you get the hell outa here - quick!"

They were gone before he finished the sentence. One of the two was my photographer. He's still a bit wary about flying on a rice drop with Air America.

We're sitting in the USIS office in Vientiane. The American Press Attache is on the phone to the Air America desk at Wat Tay airport, trying to set up the rice drop.

It's 5:30 in the afternoon and all three lines are busy. Finally he gets through. He explains that he has two reporters from Bangkok doing a story on refugees who want to go along on a rice drop.

What's that? They need clearance from the AID refugee chief? Yes, he knows that. Yes, yes, he's cleared that with Gullion already....

What? Again? That's not enough...? What else do they need? They need... Listen, he says to the man on the other end of the line, I'm the press attache here. Isn't my word good enough?! But the man on the other end won't relent.

The attache hangs up finally. Don't worry, he says to us as we leave. He'll have everything arranged by Saturday.

Before we leave Vientiane, I ask an AID official if they've ever lost a plane on a rice drop - from weather or enemy ground fire.

He grins a bit. Well, they've had some close calls, - bad weather, et cetera, - and once in a while a plane comes back with a few bullet holes, but he assures us it doesn't happen often. Good.

As we drive out to the airport, to catch a Royal Air Lao flight to Luang Prabang, I leaf through a background report prepared by USAID here on life under the Pathet Lao in Xieng Khouang Province.

There's some interesting things: "Another literacy program consists

of posters and placards placed in houses, trees, and along trails. These are usually brief political slogans such as 'Shoot down the airplanes'."

Hmm. Under "Celebrations and Rallies," I note:

"A victory celebration is held each year on October 12. The year's military successes are reviewed along with the number of enemy soldiers killed, airplanes shot down, etc."

A little further on I find the favorite banner posted on the walls in Pathet Lao territory: "Shoot Down a Thousand Airplanes." I wonder if it's too late to cancel that rice drop.

The only thing modern about Luang Prabang is the U.S. military equipment around, like the helicopters and the M16 rifles some of the Laotian soldiers lug around.

After we land in Luang Prabang we walk over to the USAID compound to find Paul White, the head of refugee operations in the town.

The yard in front of the building is filled with jeeps, trucks, and bicycles of all sorts. It's July 3 and they're getting ready for a big party. The fourth is Independence

Day in America. It's also payday for the Laotian staff.

Paul White isn't around. Finally an AID official comes by and sees us.

Who are we, he asks.

Reporters, we reply, and since we can't find Paul White would he mind if we asked him a few questions about the refugee situation in Luang Prabang?

Reporters, he says. He hadn't been warned about our coming. No, he could n't talk to us until he got clearance from the US Embassy in Vientiane. The area co-ordinator is supposed to notify them when reporters are in the area.

I ask him if he can contact Vientiane by phone or radio. They'll clear us. We have to leave tomorrow and we need to talk to Paul White.

He takes our credentials and disappears. Ten minutes later he comes back smiling. Seems somebody slipped up somewhere, but Vientiane has cleared us.

That's a relief. I'm not too good at covering parties.

While he looks for Paul, we amuse ourselves out on the porch by counting the airplanes that fly over the

building. The skies over Luang are really busy.

One T-28, two C-28's, then a single-engine Porter, then a Laotian Air Force helicopter, and another one, then a silver-grey cargo plane (a Caribou?), and... Paul comes flying into the compound in his jeep and slams on the brakes, scattering rocks and dust.

Paul is serious, a quiet young man, dressed in a University of Hawaii T-shirt and he looks tired.

He spent four years in Sam Thong among the Meo before coming to Luang Prabang a few months ago. He taught himself Meo while he lived among them. He left Sam Thong the day before the communists took the town, and the whole plain des Jarres, this spring.

The refugee situation in Luang Prabang right now is pretty stable, he explains. There's been about a thousand new refugees generated within Luang Prabang province so far this year to feed and take care of, besides the thousands already being supplied rice and supplies by the government.

The refugees are scattered all over the province. Many of them live on the tops of mountains, in little villages of 10-7 thatched huts.

The roads aren't safe - the few roads there are around here. Most supplies are dropped by planes.

Outside of Luang Prabang itself, it's either Pathet Lao or no-man's-land, except for a few small areas controlled by Meo general Vang Pao's troops. In some of these areas, the government has cleared short, unpaved airstrips where a small plane can touch down. But most of the time, the rice for the refugees is dropped from a moving plane.

How safe is it outside Luang Prabang, I ask.

He goes over to a wall map and puts his finger on Luang Prabang, lying in a small valley surrounded by mountains.

His finger runs down the map to a little dot that is labeled Xieng Ngeun. Distance, around 20 km. That's it for going south.

Then he returns to Luang Prabang and traces the Mekong river north to the town of Pak Ou,

America terminal, he explains. They don't like reporters.

Why not?

Reporters have written some pretty bad stuff about them. They're sensitive to criticism about being part of the CIA. AID is sensitive about it too. The refugee program is the closest to the people, to the war. They're involved with the refugees and the refugees are part of the war.

Paul leaves us there and drives back down the runway to the Air America section.

Correspondents in Laos can't help being suspicious about the USAID program however. It's not all Paul Whites, spending seven days a week, 24 hours a day worrying about the refugees, trying to help them. There are others.

Laos has been described as a "perfect CIA theater of action." It's a small nation, only a sideshow to the Vietnam war, with few battle headlines to demand space in the newspapers and even fewer correspondents to cover it.

On June 7, 1970, John A. Hannah, chief of the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID) publicly acknowledged that since 1962 the US aid program in Laos had been used as a cover for CIA operations.

He made it plain that he disapproved of the CIA's use of AID but for the moment there is nothing he can do. The situation remains the same.

Paul thought the pilot would be in a bad mood. When he told him he had two "customers" going with him on this trip, the pilot wasn't too happy. But Paul comes back and tells us that he seems to be in a good mood today.

As we sit there on the edge of the field a flare goes off somewhere in the hills. "The North Vietnamese have arrived," says Paul with a grin. Either that or it's the Pathet Lao celebrating the Fourth of July.

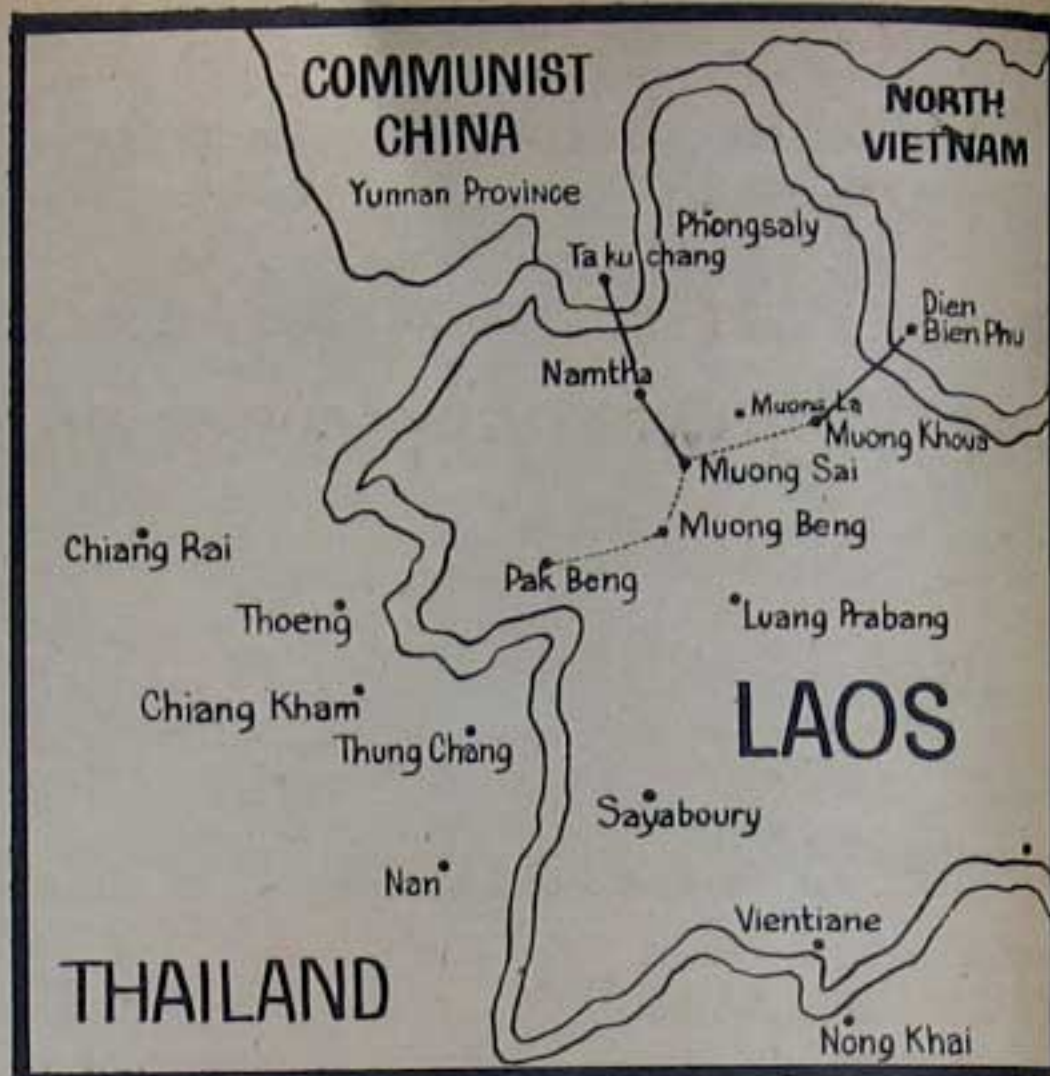
Soon a small white plane taxis down the runway towards us. The Pilatus-Porter, not much bigger than a Piper Cub, is a Swiss built STOL (short take-off, landing) craft used in the Alps for rescue work. According to Paul, it has an engine about the size of a Volkswagen motor. On rainy, windy days, when the oversized wings catch a strong updraft or down draft you think the wings are going to come off.

It's a remarkable plane, perfectly suited for Laos, where you find airstrips as short as 600 yards, 4,000 feet up on a mountainside.

For a little engine, the noise is deafening. I climb up front, next to the pilot, a big man dressed in khaki and sporting a moustache.

He's been flying the Porter for more than five years and he flies it like a Teamster drives a rig - with a professionalism approaching boredom.

"If you're on
an expense
account I'll
take a Scotch
and soda."



In the back of the plane, sitting in a small bay on top of two hatch doors, are four sacks of rice, 160 kilos.

Four more bags are behind these.

The radio squawks clearance and we swing onto the runway. Then he gives it the throttle and the Porter takes off, loaded with rice. We bank over the Mekong, brown and muddy below, and slowly climb to our cruising altitude.

Right below us tattered grey clouds are spiked on the tops of the mountains like rags on flagpoles.

The drop zone is west of Luang Prabang about fifteen minutes away. Down below it's all forest covered mountains and hills; no roads, just an occasional footpath. No telephone poles, no electric power lines, nothing. Just mountain peaks sticking up through the clouds.

The people are isolated, cut off, held in their mountain fastness. It might take several days to travel what took us ten minutes.

After a while the pilot points out the window. Down below, through the clouds, I can make out a cluster of thatched huts, about ten, sitting on a mountaintop.

As the plane banks over the village we can see a white "H" laid out on the ground. That's it. The DZ. The pilot passes over again, looking for signs of normal activity.

He's looking for people, animals, children, everything in place. This reduces the chance of a trap by Pathet Lao forces who might discover the signal and put it out themselves to lure the plane down.

We bank once more then come right in over the drop zone about 300 feet over the ground. He reaches

over to the left and yanks the bomb bay lever.

Whoosh! The doors fall open and the bags tumble into space. Through the open doors I can see them strike the ground, no more than 25 feet or so from the "H". Fine drop. Another steep bank and we come in and level off once again. Pass number two.

On the second run I can see a little girl standing just inside the doorway of one of the huts, looking up at us.

Seconds later another rush of air as the doors swing open and the last four bags fall out, twirling around till they strike the ground below. You can't hear them hit because of the noise of the plane. One second they're floating down like feathers in the breeze, then all of a sudden they're just brown sacks in the dirt. A month's supply of rice.

The whole rice drop has taken about 20 minutes. No hitches, no problems, no Pathet Lao, no wild acrobatics in the air, no engine trouble, nothing. I'm just about ready for a letdown when I look out the window at the village.

The little girl in the doorway has come outside. She's holding the edge of a rice bag with one hand and, as we pass over for the final time, smiles up at us and waves. That's enough for me. I press my nose to the cockpit window and wave back.

Back in Luang Prabang, Paul is waiting for us with the jeep. As we climb out of the plane I thank the pilot. He smiles.

"If you're on an expense account I'll take a Scotch and soda."

So much for Terry and the Pirates. As we drive away, a T-28 takes off.

THE VIEW FROM SISAVANG STREET

BY THOMAS FARTHING

Special Correspondent

The French, who began their conquest of Laos in Luang Prabang, still maintain a small cultural center here.

It's not much. A few rooms, a little library. Just a ghost of a presence.

A few weeks ago an issue of "Paris-Match" magazine was lying on the table, open to an article on the war in Indochina.

A map illustrated the spread of the war. Laos was covered with a rash of little red dots that looked like measles. Each measles represented Communist troops and right in the middle, surrounded by these little red dots, was Luang Prabang.

"War threatens to invade all Indochina!" announced the headlines. "Pathet Lao occupy the Plain des Jarres and threaten the royal village of Luang Prabang!"

That's the view from Paris.

In Luang Prabang itself the situation doesn't look quite as serious. The only thing threatening Luang Prabang right now is Senator Fulbright.

He's trying to cut American aid to Laos.

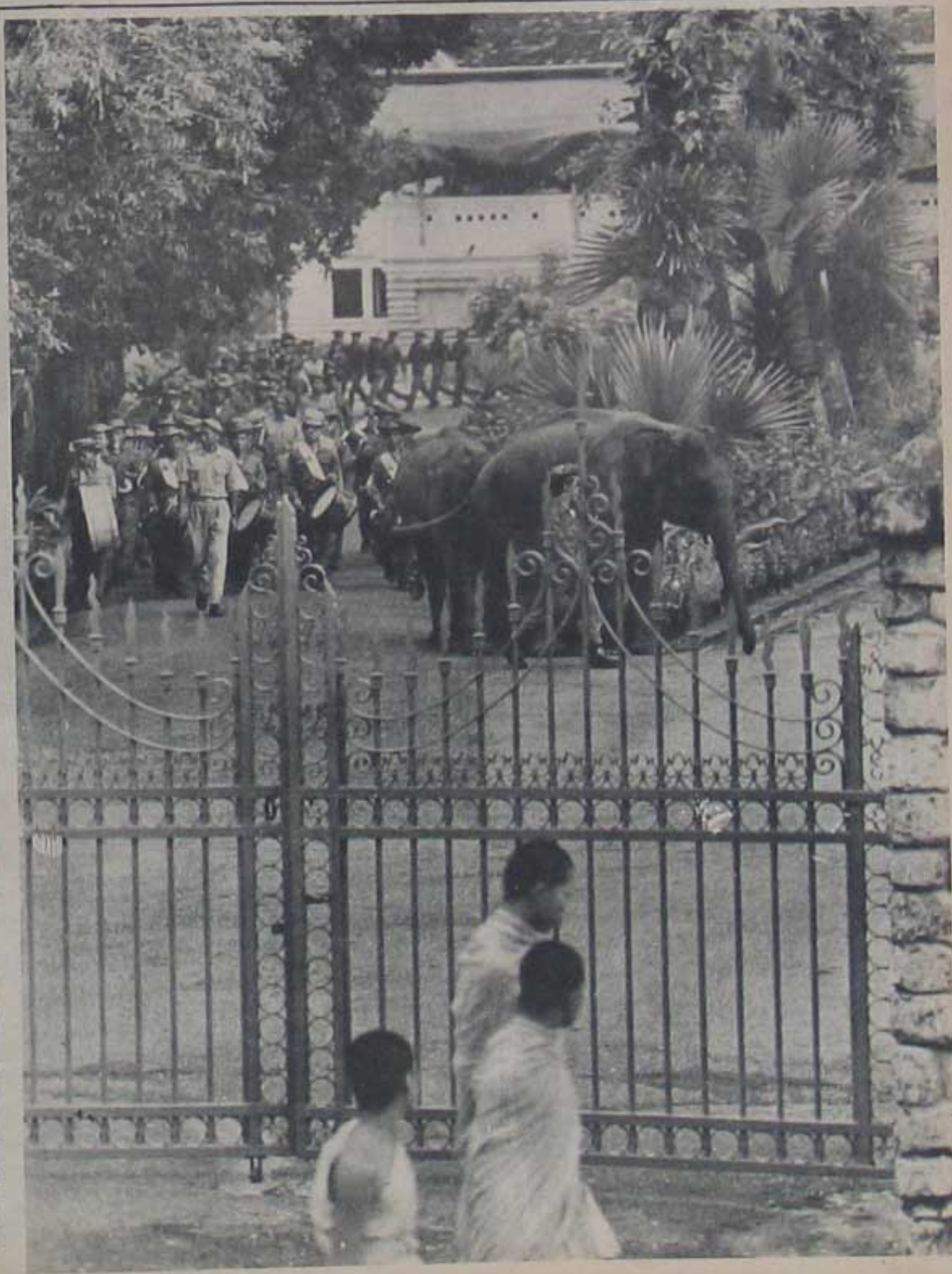
The Americans are the newest arrivals in Luang Prabang. They've been preceded by the Cambodians, Chinese, Vietnamese, Thais, Burmese, French and Japanese.

In 1353 the first Lao king, Fa Ngoun set up his royal capital here on the banks of the swift flowing Mekong in this beautiful mountain valley.

In the 600 years following, the ancient capital of Laos has been threatened, burned, sacked, occupied, re-occupied and ruled by half of the nations in Southeast Asia. And even some outside of Southeast Asia, like the French.

But Luang Prabang is a hard place to quarter an army. Until recently it has been one of the most malarial places in Indochina. Take the poor French for example.

In 1941, before the introduction of anti-malarial drugs, their soldiers in Luang Prabang had an annual hospitalization rate of 317 per cent because of malaria.





"When elephants fight, it's the grass that suffers most..."

COLOR PICTURES: Fishing the Mekong, the cave wat at Pak Ou near the king's gardens, Lao girls and Luang Prabang's loveliest wat

The mosquitoes of Luang Prabang have feasted on everything from soldiers, slave traders and pirates to colonialists, spies and diplomats.

What drew these people to Luang Prabang?

Certainly not wealth. Luang Prabang is not a particularly wealthy city, with treasures to loot, riches to rob, and fine villas to draw the greed of neighboring kingdoms.

If the barbarians who sacked Rome for its riches were to come to Luang Prabang they'd probably take one look and head for Bangkok.

That's where the money and the bright lights are.

What draws armies to Luang Prabang today is not her wealth but her geographical position. Home of the

king of Laos, king of a kingdom that is everyone's buffer state.

Buffer state between East and West, between China and North Vietnam on one hand and Thailand and the U.S. on the other.

As the Asian proverb goes, "when elephants fight, it's the grass that suffers most." The fate of Luang Prabang has been the fate of the rest of Laos.

A good place to get a perspective on Luang Prabang today is from a small restaurant table on Sisavang Street.

With a bottle of Vin d'Algerie Rouge, a tin of sardines from Thailand, and a loaf of French bread in front

of him, a visitor can spend an afternoon watching the comings and goings on the street.

Sisavang St. is filled with young Lao men in U.S. Army issue uniforms pedaling by on their bikes, carrying chickens in bamboo baskets or a meal of fried rice tied up in a palm leaf and hung from the handlebars.

Few of them carry weapons. It's hard to imagine a less martial looking group of soldiers. Chickens and food have it over rifles about two to one.

An American Army general, suddenly appearing on the scene, would probably throw up his hands in despair. Their hair's too long, they smile too much, they move too slowly



(It's true: if they pedaled any slower, the bike would fall over), they don't stand straight. They're not an army, these Laotians.

Au revoir, mon General. He's right. They're not a model of Prussian military efficiency. But they don't take the war as seriously as the Americans. And it's not a bad life.

A family of Moos walk by, the woman carrying a load of wood on her back.

Down the street there's a movie theater. An Italian western is playing. "Three Pistols For Caesar". The local artist has managed to distort the perspective so that half of the 20 foot wide billboard is covered with a huge gun barrel pointing at the passers-by.

The hero behind the gun is a bearded cowboy in a raunchy poncho, a cigar butt clenched between his teeth.

A few smiling Laotian soldiers stand in front of the billboard looking at the Coming Attractions. It's a war movie, "The Red Berets".

A little further down the street is the Moussi-Akane Hotel, alias the Lan Xang Hotel, depending on whether you believe the sign in the lobby or the sign tacked to the back of the door in your room. The Americans call it "The Bungalows."

It's the only hotel in town for foreigners. Prices are steep. A room for one without airconditioning is 2684 kip (about \$US 5.40). Visitors to Luang Prabang must fill out a long, detailed "fiche de police" when they sign in.

Unlike Vientiane, wats in Luang Prabang refuse to accept strangers at night, even if they aren't hippies.

Inside the hotel rooms there is a notice that "clients without baggage must pay one day in advance."

Laos at war is full of humorous moments and incongruous sights. It's like something out of the movie "Oh! What A Lovely War."

The strangest sight in Luang Prabang is to see a big soldier dressed in full field camouflage uniform, rifle in hand, hailing a taxi.

You can't hear what he's saying out there on the street from your table, but with a little imagination you can picture him instructing the driver:

"Where to, Mac?"

"Take me to the war."

"O.K. 100 kip. Get in."

Despite the scare headlines in "Paris-Match", threatened Luang Prabang these days is about as tense as a noodle in a bowl of Kuay Tiew.

Rumors in Bangkok had the Americans planning to evacuate Luang Prabang during the Plain des Jarres crisis.

If they were, they aren't now. At least the American officials we approached in Laos deny knowledge of any plans for such a move.



Fortunately, the Pathet Lao occasionally try to destroy the bridge across the Nam Khan river that links the town of Luang Prabang to the airfield. And last year for the first time since 1967 Pathet Lao commandos raided the airport where three planes were destroyed.

Incidents like these produce panic in the Western press - and usually a nice increase in American aid.

A classic example of this action-reaction took place in August-September of 1959 when extravagant aid to Laos was under fire in Congress and there was talk of a cut in aid.

The government of Laos reported massive communist attacks in Sam Neua province and communist thrusts towards Luang Prabang.

The press accepted the reports without question and the resulting headlines were dramatic.

There was wild talk in Congress of sending U.S. troops to Laos, and of bombing the "invaders" with U.S. Navy and Air Force planes.

Units of the Seventh Fleet were sent to the danger zone in the South China Sea. The State Department pronounced the situation "grave".

The truth became known a month later. There had indeed been Pathet Lao activity but it had been on a minor scale. Isolated military posts were sending runners with reports of massive enemy attacks in order to excuse their withdrawal.

The reports were translated into great red arrows on situation maps and forwarded to Vientiane where they became even greater arrows on even bigger maps. The press produced even more sensational stories.

The upshot: instead of a cut in aid, the Laotian government got a 30 per cent increase that year.

Luang Prabang nowadays is, however, cut off from Vientiane except by air. The road between the royal

capital and the administrative capital runs through an insecure no-man's-land that foreigners, government officials and soldiers travel on at their own risk.

Locked in the mountains like Shangri-la, Luang Prabang has little to offer the normal tourist.

Night life is almost non-existent. Vientiane is dead compared to Bangkok but Luang Prabang offers even less than Vientiane. No An-An or Dusit Thani like Bangkok, not even a hippy colony like Vientiane's Dong Palane quarter.

As for the daytime, there's just the sun, the yellow butterflies, and a block away from Sisavang Street a tree fort on the river bank where a boy can climb up and look out on the muddy Mekong and the long boats putt-putting up the river.

The Mekong flows past the king's palace further down Sisavang St. where a soldier in a red beret stands at ease inside a little red and white guardbox that reminds you of Buckingham Palace.

Other than this, there is no comparison between King Savang Vatthana's residence and the home of England's royalty.

Even at its height, the kingdom of Lan Xang was no match for the British Empire.

The kingdom of Laos once stretched from the Annamitic Chain west as far as Chiangmai and Koraat in modern Thailand. But in the early 1700's it began to fall apart, becoming three smaller kingdoms - one at Vientiane, one at Champasak in the south and one in Luang Prabang.

In 1940, the royal kingdom of Luang Prabang consisted of only four provinces: Phongsaly, Sam Neua, Sayaboury and Luang Prabang itself. Not even the whole of northern Laos today.

The French had reduced the other two kingdoms to mere colonial administrative territories when they took control of Laos. Only the kingdom of Luang Prabang remained as such, and that by the grace of God and good luck.

The late King Sisavang Vong (1904-1959) was educated in Paris. Both he and his son, the present king, were understandably pro-French during the independence struggle against France after World War II.

When Laos became an independent country the king became a constitutional monarch.

In former days, the king of Laos was a warrior king. Like the kings of Thailand he led his troops in battle and wielded a sword, making war and making peace for his people.

Modern times and modern wars are harsh on kings. The king doesn't control the war in Laos today.

The battle elephant is gone, replaced by the bomber. And while a king can ride an elephant, only a technician can fly a bomber.

Sometimes there's a parade on the palace grounds.

The soldiers, about 50 of them, stand in the sunshine inside the palacerates. A hornblower tries a few notes. The marchers line up.

It's a curious line-up today. Some of them are dressed in white straw "cowboy" hats, some in red berets.

One row is dressed in British khaki, another in US Army olive drab. Some are in sneakers, some are in shoes, still others are in boots.

Some of the soldiers have rifles, some don't. Of those that do, some have sub-machine guns, some have M2's some have M16's. Of those that have rifles, some have bayonets, some don't.

Leading the parade are two elephants, a big one and a little one. As they march around the driveway in front of the palace the band begins to play.

There are four rows of horns, a drum or two, a pair of cymbals, a big tuba and a little tuba too, and something that looks like a clarinet out of Benny Goodman's band.

Around and around they go. A few Lao stop to watch the show. The peer through the gates.

While the band plays, out at the airport four T-28's loaded with bombs under their wings head off for a sortie into the hills.

A "farang" pilot is directing the loading of Laotian troops into a waiting helicopter.

Back at the palace, the marchers are sweating in the morning sun. The band finishes and the last notes fade away. The parade is over on the palace grounds.

The Mekong river flows behind the palace. In front of the king's palace, just across the street, stands a small

You Can Forget About Going Home

(continued from Page 11)

- Where do you come from?

- We come from Xieng Khouang Province, he replies.

We come from Taeseng Seng Noy. We are seated around a wooden table in a dirt-floor room. We are in the refugee village of Ban Na Long (also known as Makhioo) 46 kilometers outside Vientiane.

Ten or twelve refugees, mostly middle-aged men, are crowded into the cool, thatched hut, sitting on their heels against the bamboo walls. Mothers with babies on their hips stand in the doorway and listen while their men talk about what it means to be a refugee. Several children peek shyly in the window at us.

- What did you do before you had to leave Xieng Khouang?

- We were rice farmers. There are over a thousand refugees in this village. Almost 25,000 refugees have been resettled by the Royal Laotian Government in villages like Ban Na Long scattered in a 60 mile radius of Vientiane.

- When did you leave your village?

- On February 4th, The American pilots came with their planes and took us away.

- Why did you have to leave the village?

- Because of the planes. We were afraid of the airplanes. They came every day, bombing the hills and the fields. We could not stay. We would be killed. The planes fired machine guns and dropped bombs. They would kill us.

I ask them when warplanes first appeared over their village. 1964, they reply. I am reminded of something I read in a copy of President Nixon's statement on Laos, given on March 6, 1970.

(In it he notes in passing that "In May 1964, as North Vietnamese presence increased, the U.S. government, at the Royal Laotian Government's request, began flying certain interdiction missions against invaders who were violating Laotian neutrality.")

But the villagers didn't leave Taeseng Seng Noy despite the bombing then. Why did they leave this time?

- Why didn't you leave in 1964 when they were bombing you?

- It was dangerous then but the planes only bombed certain areas. There were not many planes. Only a few. Now they bomb everywhere. As the war in South Vietnam escalated so did the struggle in Laos for the Ho Chi Minh trail, the Americans trying to stop the flow of supplies to the Viet Cong, the North Vietnamese fighting to keep the trails open. Now it is 1970.

- How many planes a day were flying over your village early this year?

- We saw 30-50 planes a day. By 1969, U.S. and Laotian air force bombing missions were said to be 10,000 - 15,000 sorties a month on the Ho Chi Minh trail in Laos.

- Do you know where they came from?

- Yes. They came from Udorn (Thailand) and South Vietnam. It was the bombing that finally drove them to move out of their village. There were soldiers fighting near their village often too, but they were not terrified by these skirmishes. They could live with them.

Unlike the struggle between the North Vietnamese and the U.S. where honor, pride, and credibility are at stake in an apocalyptic Free World vs. International Communism struggle to the death, the civil war in Laos between the Pathet Lao and the Government is particularly Laotian. There is room for compromise, the possibility of live-and-let-live.

Because of this Laotian attitude towards the war, villagers like those of Taeseng Seng Noy don't have to fear a Hue or a My Lai massacre if they are caught between the Pathet Lao and the Government forces.

It's only when they get caught up in the abstract passions of the bigger Cold War that they are finally destroyed. When they have to choose sides once and for all.

Soon they may have to choose sides. A month ago, North Vietnamese soldiers reportedly attacked a refugee camp north of the Plain des Jarres and killed thirty of them. Were there Pathet Lao and Government troops fighting near your village? Weren't you afraid of them too?

- Yes, they were shooting sometimes, but we were careful. We stayed near our village. They would not shoot us. But when the bombers came, more and more, again and again, we had to leave.

- Were there other soldiers in your area? North Vietnamese?

- Yes. And Thai soldiers too. I ask them about living conditions in Ban Na Long. They're quite good, in fact, probably better materially speaking than conditions in Taeseng Seng Noy.

The Royal Laotian Government, through U.S. aid money (the little kingdom is the highest receiver of American foreign aid per capita in the world) furnishes the refugees with everything: pots and pans, clothes, houses, schools, medical dispensaries, rice seed and even the title to their own rice fields if they clear the land and work it for five years.

Talking to the U.S. AID people concerned with the refugee program,

you get the feeling that they would change the weather for the refugees if they could, if it would make them happier.

But you can't blame the refugees if they want to go home again.

- When the war is over, do you want to return to Taeseng Seng Noy?

- Yes.

- Why? The government treats you to everything here - pots, food, rice fields,.....

- Yes, but this is not our home. He describes the forests and rice fields of his real home, Taeseng Seng Noi, where he and his father, and his father's father perhaps, had lived all their lives until one day the "domino theory" was born in an office somewhere across the sea, thousands of miles from Taeseng Seng Noi.

Someone once said that when a man leaves home and goes abroad to another land, he travels with a long string attached to his heart. The other end of the string is rooted in his ancestral home, where the spirits of his fathers gently but eternally tug on the line.

The interview is almost over. Just a few more questions.

- When will the war end?

- (No answer).

They look at me and smile and shrug their shoulders as if to say, what a stupid question to ask us. How should we know? We're not running the war.

One final question.

- What if the war comes here, to the Vientiane plain? What if the Pathet Lao come to Ban Na Long? Where will you go then?

- Nowhere. We will stay here. But aren't you afraid the communists will kill you? (I make a gun with my fingers. A big laugh runs through the group of refugees in the hut.)

The interview is over. It is noon - hot, dusty, still, outside the hut. An old lady brings me a pitcher of boiled water and a cup. After I drink it I wander outside into the blinding sun to look around the village.

Little kids are scrunched up against the sides of the huts trying to stay in the shade. A chicken pecks in the dust at a corn cob.

Soon several little girls approach me and hold out some paper money. It's Pathet Lao kip. Worthless scrip here in Government territory.

They all have some, mostly 200 kip notes. On one side there is a picture of a factory, a small one, with workers turning out what looks like textiles.

On the other side, Pathet Lao troops marching through the jungle towards ultimate victory.

The Royal Laotian Government offers them material security, the Pathet Lao offer them work and a glorious war. Neither one will offer them the thing they want most: a

chance to live in peace, back in Taeseng Seng Noy.

Phillip Gullion is speaking. We're at USAID headquarters back in Vientiane. Gullion is Chief of AID's He's a friendly, open person with an air of both professional and personal dedication to his work. He has been working on the refugee problem for a long time here in Laos.

But the refugees keep flowing in, keep increasing year by year. This time it's military Region 4 that's exploding.

America's move into Cambodia has indirectly increased pressure on the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Southern Laos. With the coup in Cambodia, and the closing of Kampong Som (formerly Sihanoukville) as a sea route for Communist supplies to South Vietnam battlefields, the Ho Chi Minh trail becomes doubly important. The Communists have to make sure it stays open.

They are making a sustained attempt to clear the Ho Chi Minh Trail and connecting routes of all opposition. On April 30, they captured Attopeu. On June 9 Saravane fell, both towns in Military Region 4. The battle grows and the number of refugees grows.

Gullion explains that between June 4 and June 24 more than 5,000 refugees have been airlifted or made their way on foot to Pakse, still held by the Government. He has to work out a refugee relief program for them.

Over the years, the Government is getting more and more professional at it - the movement of refugees. Just 7 hours after landing in Vientiane, the refugees from the Plain des Jarres, like Sankham's people, were in their new homes on the Vientiane Plain. America tackles the refugee problem with the same spirit that she tackled the war in Vietnam - with a lot of money and a sophisticated technology.

- For ten years now, (Gullion is explaining to me), these people have been washed back and forth over the face of this map by friendly offenses and enemy offenses. They have been driven out of their villages and returned to their villages. There has been all kinds of suffering.

I ask him the question I put to Sankham earlier.

- What if the Communists attack the Vientiane Plain? Where will you move the refugees then?

- Well, we wouldn't have to then, I mean, we will be at the end of the line. Now there is always the possibility that the Plain can be attacked and then, well, I think you in Thailand can sort of look to see us all over there. We'll be coming right across the river in a hurry!

The refugees might do that. Then again, they might just quit moving and stay where they are. After all, it's not their war.