

# The Secret War in Laos

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## The Secret War in Laos

Conboy, Kenneth with James Morrison. *Shadow War: The CIA's Secret War in Laos*. Boulder, CO: Paladin Press, 1995.

Warner, Roger. *Shooting At the Moon: The Story of America's Clandestine War in Laos*. South Royalton, VT: Steerforth Press, 1996.

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When, in April 1997, Hmong tribesmen gathered for a ceremony of self-recognition at the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, DC, it marked the closest thing yet to official acknowledgement of what was (until Afghanistan) the biggest covert paramilitary operation ever waged by the United States. The Hmong had fought at the behest of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in a so-called "clandestine army" against communist Vietnamese and Pathet Lao troops in Laos. Waged in parallel to the US war in South Vietnam, the Laotian conflict received but a fraction of the attention accorded events in Vietnam; in many ways a forgotten war as well as a secret one. Judging from the lack of alacrity exhibited by the CIA in declassifying its records of the Laotian operation (despite the promises of two Directors of Central Intelligence), Laos will go on as a forgotten war for some time. The Hmong ceremony, led by erstwhile clandestine army commander General Vang Pao, included former CIA station chiefs Theodore Shackley and Douglas Blaufarb, and Sally Shelton, widow of Far East Division chief (and later CIA boss) William E. Colby. With former station chief B. Hugh Tovar at the preceding night's dinner, it constituted the largest gathering of CIA brass ever to commemorate the Hmong or the Laotian war.

Despite CIA reticence it is already too late for the agency or the United States government to preserve the cloak of secrecy that heretofore covered the Laotian conflict. The two books reviewed here make up a good part of the reason why. Both are serious studies of the Laotian war and worthy of considerable attention, and will eventually serve as guides to the history revealed when documentary records become available.

Roger Warner (*Haing Ngor; Out of Laos*) supplies us with a most engaging narrative in his *Shooting At the Moon*. Warner tells the story of the Laotian war through the eyes of a succession of characters, from CIA mastermind Bill Lair, to farmer Edgar "Pop" Buell, to Air Force secret warriors like Richard Secord, and antiwar activists such as Fred Branfman. Along the way there are nice sketches of Vientiane, life in Laos, a variety of alarms and excursions in the secret war, the drug trade that helped make Laos controversial, and a host of other matters. Warner's selection of individuals to people his account is a reasonable one, and some of his vignettes telling. Among these is Warner's account of the notorious hearings on Laos conducted by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1969, where former ambassador William Sullivan, "the man from Wonderland," (p. 290) adroitly confronted a posse of angry senators in the effort to keep the clandestine war secret. More prosaic but equally illuminating is the story of medical expert Doctor Charles Weldon, whose encounter with the CIA in Laos revealed operators

so wedded to their paramilitary formula as to be blind to the larger dimensions in which the conflict lay embedded.

Altogether *Shooting At the Moon* is a skillfully woven and nicely executed history of an important part of America's war in Southeast Asia. Its principal weaknesses are two. First, the Hmong secret army is treated as almost the totality of the Laotian struggle, with little coverage of the activities by Royal Laotian armed forces, which actually comprised by far the greater proportion of the military the US propped up. Second, the Hmong operation itself is presented in a unidimensional way, as if the paramilitary project were simply a matter of CIA mobilization and requisite money and weapons. In fact the Hmong leaders saw themselves as building a consciousness, whether tribal or national, an aim that stood at cross-purposes to those of the Royal Laotian government. When push came to shove the US was bound to back the latter over the CIA tribesmen. Warner's report that Bill Lair in retrospect believes that the program's best chance would have been if it had been kept small neatly encompasses this dilemma without making it explicit. If the Hmong had not become such a big deal they would not have mattered to the government in Vientiane.

Concern over the need for an account of the totality of the Laotian conflict is amply answered by Kenneth Conboy's *Shadow War*. With writing help from James Morrison, Conboy, a specialist on Laos who had previously produced photographic collections and pamphlets on the armed forces engaged in the war there, now brings us a military campaign history. Replete with details on numerous Laotian ground attacks and other battles, *Shadow War* puts the Hmong secret army, as well as a number of independent CIA projects in Laos, into their contexts. In a narrative that remains chronological to a fault, Conboy's recounting of the to-ing and fro-ing of various military formations sometimes becomes too much, in part because of over frequent use of acronyms, which lend authenticity in small numbers but become deadening in mass.

*Shadow War* is solidly in the tradition of military campaign history. As such it is relatively sparse on political aspects of the Laotian conflict, which is unfortunate since politics proved so important in that war. Conboy's work is also weak on strategic planning and the machinations of bureaucrats, diplomats, and secret warriors higher up in the chain of command. For example, of the six individuals who served the CIA as chiefs of station during the Laotian experience, only two are named in *Shadow War*. Of those, Gordon Jorgenson receives but a single, simple mention, while Theodore Shackley appears more often in footnotes than in the main text. What these folks might have been up to in Vientiane, or in competition with war managers in Thailand, Saigon, or Washington, remains a cipher in this book. Considering that Laos, in its totality as a conflict, represented an adjunct to the Vietnam war, the weak treatment of strategy and politics is a significant drawback.

To some degree both these books can profitably be used in conjunction. For example, narratives are different and complementary in what each book relates about the spring 1968 battle for Lima Site 85, the mountain top navigation radar base that fell to a massed North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao assault. Similarly, in the case of the 1967-68 battle of

Nam Bac, Conboy's account focuses entirely at the level of the combat units while Warner writes of a higher level, about what transpired between Bill Lair and Ted Shackley. These are by no means the only instances.

As in small ways, so too in large ones, our knowledge of the secret war in Laos has been enhanced by both *Shadow War* and *Shooting At the Moon*. However, although details of some battles and personalities are being brought out, we still lack a nuanced vision of the Laotian cockpit. United States policy vis à vis the neutralist faction in Laos journeyed in ways that are still obscure, the Hmong were not always disciplined and loyal allies, the Vientiane government had purposes all its own, and no one has yet filled in the Pathet Lao or Vietnamese side of the story. Some of these revelations reside in the classified records on Laos, others will have to be sought using shoe leather.

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