

## BOOK REVIEWS

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Briggs, Thomas Leo. *Cash on Delivery: CIA Special Operations During the Secret War in Laos*. Rockville, Maryland: Rosebank Press, 2009. 366 pp.

Reviewed by

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There have been a number of books written about the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and their information gathering and paramilitary operations in Laos following the second Geneva Convention of 1962, which was supposed to insure Laos' neutrality. These operations continued at least up until the Peace Agreement of 1973 that brought an end to the 'Secret War' in Laos, or at least American direct involvement in it. However, most have focused on northern Laos, particularly activities involving irregular forces under the command of the infamous ethnic Hmong General Vang Pao (i.e. Hamilton-Merritt 1992; Parker 1995; Robbins 2000; Warner 2006). As Briggs puts it,

“The war in the north, at Long Tieng in support of Vang Pao and the Hmong people, received the most publicity and is the best known. Some Hmong were able to leave Laos and settle outside the country, including in the United States. The world does not know much about the people in southern Laos, who also worked with us.”

This is important, as I have noticed that many younger generation Hmong in America, and even US military veterans from the American war in Vietnam, are under the mistaken impression that only the Hmong were serious about engaging in paramilitary military operations against communist forces in Laos. Certainly there were also people

from other ethnic groups, including the Lao, who were equally serious in their support of the American war effort.

Only Kenneth Conboy's (1995) *Shadow War: The CIA's Secret War in Laos*, pays considerable attention to other parts of the country. There is now, however, a new book that documents the personal experiences of one American CIA case officer who was based in Pakse, in southern Laos, from 1970-72, where he specialized in intelligence gathering activities involving mainly ethnic minority (non-Hmong people from Mon-Khmer language speaking groups in southern Laos) irregular paramilitary soldiers along the Ho Chi Minh Trail to the east near the border with Vietnam. This case officer, the author of the book, is Thomas Leo Briggs, a university graduate in History who ended up as a military police officer in Vietnam prior to joining the CIA and being assigned to work in Laos.

Briggs' book, unlike Conboy's, does not attempt to provide a comprehensive history of the CIA's covert operations in Laos. Instead, this 32-year veteran of US government service presents the story of his personal experiences in Laos. Briggs' autobiographical account of his two years in Laos is indeed detailed, fascinating and informative, and those interested in better understanding what life was like for case officers working in southern Laos in the early 1970s will find this book a valuable addition to their libraries. It certainly does not duplicate previous works on the 'Secret War' in Laos.

Briggs' story is particularly interesting because he was not an "ammo-humper", as he refers to some case officers who were particularly interested in direct combat with the North Vietnamese and their Pathet Lao allies (see Eckhardt (1999) and Parker (1995) for examples of what Briggs is talking about). Briggs apparently rarely if ever fired shots during his time in Laos, although he was apparently a skilled marksman, and did carry guns in the field. He mainly operated out of bases on the Boloven Plateau, which he commuted to and from by plane on a daily basis. He lived with his wife in Pakse. For Briggs, the focus was on generating useful data that could be used in support of the US-supported war effort.

Soon after Briggs' arrival in Laos, he learned that for various reasons the 'roadwatch' teams that he was assigned to direct were not collecting very useful data.

He therefore looked for new ways to usefully utilize the teams for gathering intelligence. He eventually came upon the idea of cajoling them into either inducing the defection or literally 'grabbing' enemy North Vietnamese soldiers from near the Ho Chi Minh Trail. He offered rewards of up to US\$1,000 to members of his teams for each liver officer they could bring in, with smaller amounts being paid for lower level soldiers. He was not particularly interested in capturing Lao soldiers, since he believed that they tended to know little about the type of detailed information about North Vietnamese order of battle information and other specific intelligence that he was particularly interested in obtaining. Although some roadwatchers dared not attempt such actions, the plan nonetheless worked, and during his time in Laos some of the teams under his direction were able to deliver a number of North Vietnamese soldiers, either willingly or against their will. Most eventually agreed to provide useful intelligence, although those up the chain did not always make good use of the information provided to them). The author claim that he did not authorize any torture or other extreme measures that violated the prisoners' fundamental rights, although he is careful to qualify these claims by not denying that the Royal Lao Army military that he worked with might have used more extreme measures for getting prisoners 'to talk'. In any case, some prisoners apparently provided useful information quite willingly. Others required more 'persuasion'. The book does describe one case in which an uncooperative Vietnamese prisoner who was deemed to be obsessed with cleanliness was threatened with being denied certain privileges that would have significantly affected his ability to remain so clean.

Although I suspect that many will find this book interesting, since it fills an important gap in our understanding of US secret operations in Laos in the early 1970s, it is not without its weaknesses. To begin with, it is written for those who already understand clearly how the CIA ended up as the lead agency in Laos after 1962. I think it would have benefited from at least a few pages of 'big-picture' background information about the war and the American involvement in Laos early on. For example, the author does not explain that the US army was not able to openly operate in Laos after 1962 because the Geneva Conventions specified that Laos was to be a neutral country without any foreign troops operating on her soil. Nor does he explain that

neither the North Vietnamese nor the Americans abided by the conditions of the Geneva Conventions. He does not explicitly state the Americans wanted to appear as if they were abiding by the conditions, but it is well documented that that is why they ended up sending hundreds of plain-clothed American CIA operatives into Laos to direct or otherwise support covert paramilitary operations against communist forces there; in order to disguise the illegality of their presence in Laos according to the international treaty. The North Vietnamese were even more blatant in their violation of the Geneva Conventions, with thousands of troops freely operating on Lao soil. The Vietnamese also used the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos as their main artery for moving troops, arms and other military supplies vital for their war efforts in South Vietnam. The US responded with intense aerial bombardment, thus leaving Laos as the most intensely bombed country in history.

Considering that the Ravens, the US plain-clothed airmen who supported military operations in Laos (see Robbins 2000), are discussed extensively in the book, some background about them should also have been included early-on in the book.

There are also some historical inaccuracies included in the book. For example, Briggs claims that Laos was partitioned in 1962. In fact, that occurred during the First Geneva Conventions eight years earlier, in 1954, when Phongsaly and Sam Neua Provinces were given over to the communist Pathet Laos as temporary safe areas, in preparation for establishing a coalition government for national reconciliation.

Another rather minor quibble, which is more of an occasional distraction than a serious detriment to the book, relates to the various small grammatical, spelling and other writing errors and typos included in the book. There is also some unnecessary repetition. For example, in the first few pages of the book the author mentions three times that CIA operations in Laos served their purposes in diverting valuable North Vietnamese military resources to Laos, thus making them unavailable to the war in South Vietnam, where they would have been used against US forces. These errors could have easily been avoided had the book been subjected to rigorous proof editing by a professional copy editor.

Also, the author incorrectly refers to the Lane Xang Hotel in Vientiane as the 'Lane Xiang Hotel'. He also incorrectly claims that Lao people simply burn all their rice

stubble after harvesting. In fact this actually occurs quite rarely. The author seems to be confused or mistaken about this. In addition, the authors' understanding of Lao language is clearly quite limited, although he claims to have learned Lao from his colleagues. This is evident from his claim that the word "shotgun" was chosen because it was easy for Lao language speakers to pronounce. He seems unaware that there is no "sh" sound in Lao. If he was looking for an easy word for Lao-language speakers to pronounce, he certainly could have done better than 'shotgun'!

Another quibble I have is with the way Briggs deals with the issue of CIA censorship of parts of the book. Of course, it was necessary for Briggs to pass his book through the agency for editing, since he was contractually committed to keeping information he collected secret. The problem, for me, is the way Briggs deals with the issue in the book. Instead of simply stating that he was obliged to do this, which would have been acceptable, he claims that CIA censorship is not hiding information from the public, but is simply about keeping information that should be classified from entering the public domain. In fact, CIA censorship does indeed hide information from the public, whether justified or not. To deny this does is not very helpful. However, it may well be that keeping some information from the public, such as full names of people involved, including those Lao Nationals that worked with the CIA, is prudent. Maybe it was just a matter of wording, but this section could have been presently more credibly.

The author also makes the rather unbelievable and epistemologically questionable claim that the CIA "did not cause any cultural clashes with the population of Laos" (pg. 3). There is no doubt that many would find such an extreme statement much too definitive, considering that the CIA were essentially in charge of the lives of large numbers of ethnic minorities who worked for them. Again, a more nuanced treatment of this issue would have been appropriate. Briggs does, however, acknowledge the importance of culture in mediating the circumstances of the conflict.

It seems similarly one-sided when Briggs states, on page 328, that, "For the peasants, the CIA led activity provided well-paid employment, brought money into the country, and bolstered the economy. I do not recall any peasant uprisings against the Royal Lao Government or calls by the peasants against the Royal Lao Government."

This certainly represents, at best, a rather naive statement, considering that most of the ethnic minorities in the far east of the country had long been fully cooperating with the Pathet Lao despite considerable risks to themselves and their families. How could unarmed or poorly armed villagers in government-controlled areas have been expected to rise up against the military power of the (almost totally US financed) Royal Lao Army, if they had wanted to? More subtle treatment of this issue would have considerably increased the author's credibility.

Another serious problem with the book is the way it ends. Up until the last 50 or so pages the book flows quite well as a single story, but then Briggs chooses to include, apparently as an afterthought, a lengthy discussion about the importance of US intelligence operations generally, and the need to improve them. In this section the author strays away from discussing his experiences in Laos, or even directly linking what happened in Laos to US intelligence issues, and instead dwells on challenges amongst the US intelligence community, sometimes referring to places as diverse as Germany, Afghanistan and Iraq. It is not that what he writes is irrelevant or that it is not potentially interesting or important, but it does not, I believe, belong in this book (at least not such a lengthy discussion). The author would have done better to have refrained from including all the information in the book. Instead, he should have crafted a stand-alone article to explain his various ideas about US intelligence policies and practices, which he is clearly passionate about. For those of us who are more interested in what happened in Laos, this last section is more of a distraction. It is an anti-climax. It does not fit well with the rest of the book. A much shorter summary of his ideas about the lessons learned from Laos would have been tolerable, even useful. It appears that the author might have been afraid that if he did not include his general thoughts in the book, they might not have ended up in print anywhere. A good editor would have pointed this out to the author, but he apparently did not have one. That is a shame.

This book could have been a very good book, had it received the editorial support that it deserved, but while it will still be of interest to scholars and others studying US CIA operations in Laos, the deficiencies mentioned above detract significantly from the overall product. This book is a prime example of why academic

publishers have peer review processes and rigorous content and proof editing associated with them: it does make a difference.

In addition, the positioning of the author is sometimes a bit disturbing, and this will probably be especially evident to non-Americans like me (I am a Canadian). The book is written in a very 'American-centric' way, which might not be surprising since the author is American. However, for non-American readers one sometimes wonders why, for example, so much effort is put into saving American lives as compared to their Lao counterparts? Aren't all lives of equal value? This emphasis is especially clear in the part of the book where the extraction of a crashed American Raven pilot and his Lao 'backseater' near Paksong is described. This positioning is also evident in various other parts of the book, including in the chapter where Briggs discusses Americans missing in action in Laos. There was clearly much less concern for the Lao than Americans, although Briggs evidently had strong feelings for many of his colleagues, especially his Thai assistants/translators. In fairness, he also acknowledges that the Americans used the people in Laos, and that when it was expedient, they simply abandoned them. Briggs also disagreed with putting the lives of so many paramilitary forces in danger through using them for conventional military battles, a practice that became increasingly common later in the war, and led to large numbers of casualties. He makes it clear at various points in the book that America's objectives in Laos had little to do with specifically helping the Lao. Instead, American interests were the main motivation for US involvement in Laos, although that does not mean that individual case officers, such as Briggs, did not develop personal relations with some of their Lao colleagues.

In that the book is written by an American CIA operative, it is difficult to assess what the roadwatchers thought of Briggs, who used the code-name 'Chanh' when in Laos. Some probably liked him, but at least one apparently accidentally blew himself up and killed another roadwatcher with a grenade at the same time when he was planning to use against Briggs if he had refused to pay him and his team for a mission that they were involved in! Briggs was apparently quite strict in trying to prevent roadwatchers from cheating him by not actually conducting the operations that they claimed they were involved with. That probably hurt his popularity significantly, for better or worse. Crucially, the lack of commitment to operations attributed to many of the Lao

roadwatchers clearly illustrates that they felt that they were involved in a US war rather than a war of their own. My interviews with ethnic Brao roadwatchers also indicate that this was the case.

From my own research on the ethnic Brao people who worked at one of the PS (Pakse Sites) that the author worked with, PS-7 at Kong My, in southeastern Attapeu Province, I would also have expected to have heard more about some other issues, such as the presence of large numbers of 'ghost soldiers' (soldiers on the payroll but not really in existence), which from my own interviews with Brao informants, certainly existed before the arrival of Briggs, and presumably afterwards as well. Was Briggs aware of this? Briggs does, however, write about how he photographed all the roadwatchers soon after he first arrived. However, from the account in the book, this was apparently done primarily to insure that the families of those killed in action were provided with appropriate death benefits.

Still, to be fair, I enjoyed reading this book and despite its deficiencies I would still recommend it to others with a particular interest in the history of US involvement in the 'Secret War' in Laos. In particular, the detailed accounts of the author's interactions with his Thai assistants and Lao roadwatchers are both well informed, rare in the literature, and fun to read, and there are also a few good action sections included in the book as well, which keeps it from becoming a dull read. Crucially, the author is quite analytical, which is refreshing when compared to some 'war story' authors from the Vietnam War era. He does provide some interesting and useful insights into intelligence collecting operations in Laos, and globally, and he is not afraid to criticize those activities that he considers to be poor quality, or in some cases even totally useless.



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