



The Hmongs: pawns of the American containment strategy

2/3 - Military Review n°55

Monsieur Corentin CURTENELLE

Published on 30/10/2019

Histoire & stratégie

In 1954, the United States was the only serious bulwark against communist expansion in Southeast Asia. Washington wanted to rely on reliable allies who could support it in its policy of containment.

Laos, a country of the former French Indochina, has been in civil war since 1954. The country is then distinctly divided into three parts: the central government of Vientiane supported by the Americans, the neutralists of Kong Le, captain of the royal Laotian army fomenting a coup d'état and the communists of Pathet Lao. Confronted with the weakness of the Royal Laotian Armed Forces (FAR) opposed to the communists, the Americans opt for a solution that they consider more effective: the support of the Hmongs.⁸. With the U.S. military's commitment proving impossible...⁹the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) becomes Washington's armed wing in Laos. Several agents joined this country to make contact with the mountain populations, including a commander of the FAR: Vang Pao. An intrepid warrior with a strong charisma, he was ideally suited to join the Hmong guerrilla leadership. He was notably engaged with his men by the Americans in Operation Momentum, which began on January 17, 1961. Vang Pao's mission was to lead the guerrilla units in the guerrilla warfare against the opponents of the central government, and later on, to fix the units in North Vietnam to prevent them from overrunning the conventional units in South Vietnam.

The CIA's war in Laos resembles the operations carried out by the GCMAs. On the other hand, the means granted are more important. Right from the start of the operation, nearly 1,000 Hmongs are already fully equipped. The objective of this small army is to hold the Plain of Jars and to carry out harassment actions on Route 7 and Route 13 which are strategic axes towards North Vietnam. Nevertheless, from the beginning of the operation, the CIA's thinking heads were divided on the role to be assigned to the Hmongs. Some¹⁰ propose that the Hmong be made allies with conventional missions that go far beyond guerrilla actions; they would like the "mountain people" to be involved in larger

operations¹¹.

These ambitious plans are then not taken into account. Between 1961 and 1968, the CIA and their delegates confined themselves to guerrilla tactics to attack the communist columns. The results were quite impressive. Several testimonies evoke the transformation of this troop, composed of simple peasants, into a force capable of carrying out complex operations.¹² The same applies to the province of Sam Neua, where the communists were banned from entering in March 1965. This effectiveness is the result of the CIA's supervision, but also of the militarisation of the movement started by Vang Pao. Special Operations Teams were set up. These are elite units of literate Hmongs who receive further training in tactics, communications and intelligence. These soldiers are also trained in parachuting. These elements are thus able to deploy quickly to an assigned area to carry out more "sophisticated" operations and take command of guerrillas. Coupled with these units with tighter manpower, the Special Guerrilla Unit is also formed. These men receive more advanced training for operations requiring the use of more firepower. This structure of the guerrillas, to which were added significant American resources, particularly in air support, enabled the Hmongs to hold out against the communists, and even to regain ground. On the face of it, therefore, and in both the French and American situations, the guerrilla warfare seemed to be a success. Unfortunately, serious dysfunctions will condemn these movements.

A misuse of the Hmong tribes

During these two conflicts, the French and the Americans will make strategic mistakes. In the French case, the lack of interest in these auxiliary units led to a lack of support. Washington, on the other hand, was too dependent on its maquis and ended up entrusting them with responsibilities that were not commensurate with them.

Under-exploitation of the maquis by the French

The GCMA's seemed promising, but many soldiers remained doubtful about the effectiveness that such "soldiers" could have on the enemy's rear, hence a certain lack of interest. The situation of the "Colibri" maquis¹³ is an example. In mid-October 1953, this maquis had to face well-trained and infinitely more numerous communist elements. Indeed, in the area they occupied, the mountain people prevented Ho Chi Minh's forces from having free access to communication routes. The Viet Minh therefore decided to carry out a cleansing operation to put an end to this resistance which threatens its rear and destroys the communist influence in the area.

the Black River region. Faced with this large-scale offensive, the Hmongs were quickly overwhelmed, cornered and forced to fight as a conventional unit, with very little room to retreat. Despite requests for reinforcement of the GCMA in shock units, in particular the 8th Airborne Commando Group attached to the GCMA, the Hmongs were quickly overwhelmed, cornered and forced to fight like a conventional unit, with very little space to retreat.¹⁴ To help "Hummingbird" and bring more firepower, the maquis never get the help they need. The commander of the North Vietnamese land forces, in a note to Battalion Commander Trinquier¹⁵ confirms that sending a regular unit is out of the question.¹⁶ "Hummingbird" is thus sacrificed. On the other hand, the French command, poorly informed, also overestimated the capabilities of certain maquis. During the battle of Den Biên Phu, General Cagny¹⁷ calls on them to intensify their efforts to secure the Giap units that descend to the bowl¹⁸. However, this is an impractical order for those units

whose low firepower does not allow the attack of heavily equipped conventional units.

This lack of consideration, which is relatively widespread, has important repercussions on the use of maquis. According to Trinquier, many valuable military leaders are not adaptable. In their view, winning the battle is mostly through the "regular army. As a result, trust in the maquis is very limited within the staffs.¹⁹ If we add to this kind of blindness the too small number of volunteers to join these off-line units, the French army suffers from a lack of knowledge of the terrain and a lack of experience.

8 Following the French defeat, many migrated to Laos.

9 Laos is an internationally recognised neutral country.

10 Notably the head of the CIA in the Far East, Desmond Fitzgerald.

11 Joshua Kurlantzick: "A great place to have a war: America in Laos and the birth of a Military CIA", New York, Simon&Schuster, 2017, p. 79.

12 Ahern, op. cit. pp. 174-715.

13 Important maquis; there are nine maquis scattered in northern Indochina, Laos and Vietnam.

14 Request No. 3364/3/OPS of 21 July 1952, Lieutenant-Colonel Grall, SHAT 10H829.

15 ESDEC officer in charge of the "Action" service in Tonkin and the GCMAs.

16 Note No. 344/FTNV/GENE/TS of 2 October 1953, SHAT 10H827.

17 Major General, commanding the ground forces in North Vietnam.

18 Note No. 10369/FTNV/3/T3 of 30 April 1954, signed p.o. Colonel Bastiani, Chief of Staff of the North Vietnamese Land Forces, SHAT 10H1169.

19 Colonel Roger Trinquier: "Les maquis d'Indochine, les missions spéciales du service action", Aix-en-Provence Albatros, 1976, p. 110.

Title : Monsieur Corentin CURTENELLE

Author (s) : Monsieur Corentin CURTENELLE

Release date 24/10/2019

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