



From guerrilla to conventional warfare: the overexploitation of Hmong guerrilla warfare

3/3 - Military Review n°55

Monsieur Corentin CURTENELLE

Published on 31/10/2019

Histoire & stratégie

Until 1968, the guerrilla warfare led by the Hmongs was a success. Nevertheless, the Lao Pathet, reinforced with Vietnamese elements, launched an offensive on the Plain of Jars.²⁰ as early as January. The weakness of the Laotian army makes the Hmong force the main line of defence of Laos against the communists.

If Vang Pao, who has a truly small army (30,000 men), excels in "small war", he cannot fight a conventional war.²¹ The means available to the Hmongs are derisory compared to the communist armada and American air support is proving to be ineffective.²² The walk is too high for "mountain people".

Thus in March 1968, during the battle that led to the loss of "Lima site 85", they were unable to fight effectively against the tanks that were facing them. The FAR, which suffered severe losses during the battle of Nam Bac (11-13 January 1968), proved incapable of supporting the guerrillas. Washington then decided to involve Thailand, also threatened by the communist advance in Laos. Thai units were thus parachuted into Laos and the US Air Force made its contribution. But the reinforcements are too few compared to the important means available to the communist forces. The change in the type of mission entrusted to the Hmong proved devastating for the Hmong, who suffered considerable losses. In 1969, Vang Pao warned the CIA that he was unable to continue the war at this pace. For every ten men lost, he could only recruit three, often very young men. To illustrate this point, in 1971, 70% of his recruitment was of children who did not have the strength to fight.²³

The Pathet Lao quickly regains lost ground and pushes back the mountain people. At the end of 1971, the positions of the communist forces are firmly held. The control of strategic cities on the Mekong River leaves little hope for a victory of Washington's allies in Laos.²⁴ The defeat of the Americans came about in 1973 at the time of the Treaty of Paris, when they agreed to withdraw from Vietnam, just as they abandoned their activities in Laos. Henceforth, the "mountain people" were deprived of all support. Two years later, the Pathet Lao, which took power, eliminated the last seeds of resistance.

This seizure of power by the Pathet Lao in Laos sounded the death knell hopes. When the time came for the return of experience, some Americans considered the guerrilla warfare to be a success. For Richard Helms, director of the CIA, the operations in Laos made it possible to contain the communists much more effectively than American troops on the ground.²⁵ Indeed, the Hmongs, together with other anti-communist forces, set up a considerable number of North Vietnamese divisions between 1961 and 1973, thus preventing them from flooding into South Vietnam. But it also appears to observers that Vang Pao had neither the training nor the training, let alone the material support, necessary to successfully engage in conventional warfare.

During the 20th century, the French and Americans were led to call upon indigenous people in their interventions in Southeast Asia. Such recourse appeared necessary to compensate for the lack of knowledge of the environment (physical, human, political) of the theatre of operations. They have also made it possible to increase the number of personnel available, which staffs still consider insufficient.

Confined to missions that combine agility, speed, rusticity and employed locally in a range that remains not far from the area where their villages are located, these off-line troops are proving to be extremely effective. They excel in ambushes, intelligence, and may be assigned secondary missions in support of a main corps. However, it has been demonstrated that, once out of a certain context, the effectiveness of "these auxiliaries" becomes illusory. Of the category of light troops, these units, lacking in firepower, are incapable of competing with the troops of a battle corps. Similarly, their motivation decreases as the combat zone expands. This is the observation of Vang Po in Laos, whose soldiers desert as they move away from their villages.

These essential data, conveyed by too few managers, have led both to a certain scepticism about the effectiveness of the system and to the lack of a clear understanding of the problem. These essential data, conveyed by too few managers, have led both to scepticism about the effectiveness of the "mountain people", which has tragically resulted in abandonment, and to an unmeasured optimism, the effects of which have been disastrous.

This example shows the value of familiarising our officers with combat among the people and encourages an understanding of the environment without which there can be no command performance.

20 Laurent César: "L'Indochine en guerres", Paris, Belin, 1995, p. 151.

21 Jane Hamilton-Meritt: "Tragic Mountains, The Hmongs, The Americans and the secret war for Laos", Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1993, p. 140.

22 The Communists used the night to move around.

23 Victor M. Hwang: "The Hmong campaign for justice: a practitioner's perspective", Asian American Law Journal, Vol. 9, January 2002, pp. 85-115, p. 92.

24 William M. Leary: "CIA Air operations in Laos, 1955-1974", Center for the Study of Intelligence, Winter 1999-2000, pp. 51-67, p. 63.

25 Richard Helms: "A look over my shoulder: a life in the central intelligence agency," New York, Random House, 2003, 496 pages, pp. 262-265.

Title : Monsieur Corentin CURTENELLE
Author (s) : Monsieur Corentin CURTENELLE
Release date 24/10/2019

[FIND OUT MORE](#)