

I Was a Prisoner OF THE Reds in Laos

Here is the firsthand account of a terrifying cold-war experience which President Kennedy called "a more exacting test of a man's courage than the battlefield"

By Maj. LAWRENCE R. BAILEY, U. S. A.
as told to Jack Ryan

EDITORS' NOTE: On July 21, 1962, the Laotian civil war ended with the signing of a peace treaty in Geneva, Switzerland. The treaty included provisions for the release of prisoners held both by the government forces and by the Communist rebels. Several weeks later five Americans were freed by the Communists. Among them was the author of this article, who had been held 17 months—longest of any of the prisoners. Subsequently, he was awarded the Bronze Star medal by President Kennedy for "heroic and meritorious service." It was the first time the Bronze Star had been given for valor in the cold war.

THE DOOR to my prison dungeon opened. Two Communist guards stood outlined in dim light. One trained a rifle on me; the other pushed my daily meal toward me—a handful of rice and a fish, complete with its head.

I peered into the hall behind them, but I had been imprisoned in darkness for weeks and ever faint light was harsh on my eyes. Where were the interrogators? I set myself for their usual questions: why were Americans in Laos? what was U. S. policy? did I know SEATO was an agency of imperialism?



Hospitalized after his grim ordeal as prisoner of the Pathet Lao, Major Bailey receives the Bronze Star from President Kennedy. Daughter Barbara looks on.

Instead, the guards retreated, slamming the door closed; and I was alone again in the dark. Only a thin ray of sunlight beamed through a slit in the sheets of tin covering the windows. I began to realize what the Pathet Lao were trying.

They had threatened execution. That had scared me but not enough to answer questions. So now, I guessed, they were pitting me against a worse enemy than fear—the slow corrosion of solitude.

I found myself leaning forward on my cot, almost hoping to pick up the sounds of approaching interrogators. Silence. I knew that I must find some way to keep my sanity. I must not let darkness, stillness, loneliness eat away at my mind.

My room was about 12 by 15 feet. It probably had been the living room of a French colonial house in the town of Samneva, near the northeastern border of North Vietnam. It had two French doors, covered by the tin, a fireplace, my cot, and a waste bucket. Nothing more except roaches, flies, spiders, and rats rustling in the corners. I didn't know it then, but this would be my world for nearly a year.

The story started about 10:45 on March 23, 1961. It was a bright and cloudless morning, and as assistant military attaché to the U. S. embassy in Vientiane, Laos, I was en route to Vietnam.

Over the drone of the C-47's engines came a sudden pop-pop-pop. I had heard enough antiaircraft fire as an Air Corps pilot in the South Pacific to recognize danger. I looked out the windows. Puffs of white were in the sky now, and flames leaped around the starboard wing.

"We're hit!" I yelled. "Bail out!"

Seven men were aboard the C-47, but only I had a single-unit parachute ready to jump. The others rushed to the rear of the plane for the necessary canopy chutes to add to their rigging. I got out of their way, found the emergency door already open, and flung myself out.

I pulled the rip cord. It wouldn't open. Every muscle and sense concentrated on the loop and metal ring, yet I was dimly aware of chunks of twisting metal floating around me. My body shuddered under some impact, then with a final tug I ripped open the chute.

I came down, swaying back and forth in the harness, with my left arm dangling loosely over my shoulder. It was broken clean, and I could see the hurtling pieces of disintegrating wing that had struck me.

THE BROWN-GREEN grazing land of the Plaines de Jarres, a plateau in the mountainous region of northern Laos, was below me, but I only vaguely recall the descent. Half in shock, I struck with impact enough to stun me. When my head cleared, I was looking at a herd of water buffalo chomping stolidly nearby and, in the distance, an ominous column of sooty smoke.

That would be the plane, and if I could get there quickly enough I might help some survivors. I shucked the parachute and stood up—and fell back in excruciating pain. My left leg twisted under me; apparently a piece of wing had struck me behind the knee.

I lay helpless in a no man's land. Both Laotian and Pathet Lao patrols roamed this region. Which would find me? Obviously the Reds were nearby; they had shot down