our plane. But the smoke might attract friendly forces.

The answer came about two hours later when 20 short, stocky figures approached me, rifles ready, flat-featured Oriental faces studying me intently. Their battle-green fatigues blended with the mountains behind them, but I recognized them as Pathet Lao.

"Hiii!" one shouted, coming forward. He held both hands over his head as an indication of what I should do with mine, so I lifted my right hand and pointed to the crippled left one.

"I can't!" I shouted back. One Communist lifted his rifle and aimed at me. "I can't!" I yelled again. Impassively, he sighted and pulled the trigger.

I burrowed into the ground. My muscles went rigid as if they could resist a slug. But the bullet drummed into the ground beside me, a warning shot. "Can kill! Can kill!" the Pathet Lao called.

"My arm is broken," I shouted back. The rifle leveled at me again, but this time the leader waved the rifleman away and came closer, dark eyes fixed on my arm. When I saw him approach me quickly, I knew I had convinced him I was helpless.

On an improvised stretcher they lugged me through mountainous jungle to a clearing where an English-speaking officer joined us. Revolver in hand, he hovered over me while my head swam with pain and shock. He had my identification

American-trained Laotians practice guerrilla tactics in the jungle brush.

papers clutched in his hand.

"You are Major Bailey, a military attaché. Why are you in Laos? By what right? We should kill you. What is American policy here? What do you plan? What was your flight concerned with?"

The revolver wavered at my head, and I wanted to shut my eyes and ears to everything. The questions became insistent, and he gave up only when a Jeep-like vehicle arrived and I was put in back. I was jostled over a rugged path to a tin-roofed hospital deep in the jungle, where a doctor put my arm in a cast. Then teams of interrogators picked up the lone officer's questioning. It went on for a week, then I was flown to my black hole in Samneva, my face covered by a cloth so I could see nothing.

The questioning sessions at Samneva have merged into a dreamlike blur. The Reds' technique was punishment and reward, though, something like we use in training dogs. I vividly remember once when three or four interrogators, a Laotian interpreter, and some guards stood around my cot. When there were no answers to the questions, a guard pulled back the bolt of his rifle and slammed it forward into firing position. He aimed at my skull.

"WE SHOULD execute you . . ." the interpreter began, but all I was aware of was the guard's stubby finger tense over the trigger. I heard the hammer click with unreal sharpness. But there had been no bullet in the chamber. I felt drained, lying in sweat on the thin pads of my cot. "We could execute you. Nobody would know."

And they started again.

Next came rewards. Fish and rice eventually twisted my insides with dysentery. I started getting chills and fever. "We have buffalo meat outside and bananas," the interpreter said. "We are willing to share this with you."

Worst, though, was not knowing what would happen next. The Communists played skillfully on my doubts, implying execution in one session, freedom in the next, then some unnamed torture.

IN JUNE they took the cast off, and I sensed the stalemate had reached another showdown. I pictured myself kneeling with a pistol pressed coldly at my skull and, at happier moments, being taken to the lines and turned loose. I didn't figure on isolation. I suppose that was their ace. I could always escape my black hole, of course. I just had to call the guards and answer questions I knew by rote now.

Over the months, I had trained myself to picture my cell as the living room of our home in Laurel, Md., and I carried on daily conversation with my wife Betty and our three children, Barbara, Larry, and Elaine. While they lasted, these illusions were wonderful, but crashing back to my four walls had an almost physical impact.

The haunting questions would rise again. Does my family know I'm alive? Have I been reported missing—or dead? I knew very well the agony of not knowing, of waiting from day to day, half in hope and half in despair. When guards would bring my food, I would ask to write Betty a letter. If I got any reply, it was: "Tomorrow—maybe."

On Oct. 18, 1961, the guard handed me two pieces of paper with my meal. I snatched them eagerly. They were letters from home. Through the Red Cross, my wife and mother had managed to send form messages. *"We thank God you are alive . . . We are well . . . We pray for you."* They

Out on a training patrol, a camouflaged Laotian points to objective.

could write only 25 words. But what wonderful words!

It was important, I knew, that I keep track of time. Lying on my cot I saw how the slit of light through the window would grow stronger until it became a brilliant shaft of blue with dust particles whirling through it. This would be noonday. I pulled a nail from the wall and waited for the light to reach its apex. As soon as it did, I turned to the wall and scratched a mark. Thus I counted days. Ten marks grew to 100, then 200.

During one of the teasing "concession" periods, I inveigled the Reds into giving me a broom. I worried about tuberculosis, malaria, and amoebic dysentery; in fact, I had symptoms of all and was weakening each day, my ribs sticking through the flesh and my arms skeletal. For health purposes, I wanted a clean house.

And by now this cell was "my house." In my mind, I had built partitions. My "bedroom" contained my cot; the "living room" was around my chair; the "washroom" was near the pail. The partitions became solid walls in my mind, and I would walk around them, entering each room by a "door."

The dry season passed into the wet season, and I listened to the torrent of rain; then came the dry season again, and the marks on my plaster wall reached more than 300. My routine settled down, and while I doubt if anybody "conquers" isolation, I learned to come to grips with it. And as I did, the door opened again, and I faced guards with leveled rifles.

"Pie! Pie" they snapped. I knew that meant go. I walked, blinking, into the corridor and out into the night. Old doubts welled up in me. I had outlasted Oriental patience, but in the end they held all the cards and even in minor triumph I could be the loser.

I was led inside a large building which I guessed was the city hall and then into a cell-like room.

FOR DAYS I lived in a sort of limbo, but then came another abrupt visit by my guards, and I was tossed a packet. I tore open the string—45 letters from home! Betty had written every week, but only one terse message from her had been allowed to reach me.

Hopes rose. So did my counting of days. The letters arrived March 22, one day short of a year after my capture. April and May came and went; so did hope and despair. During June and July, treatment improved, but nobody would tell me why. Doubt was the one oppression they never let up on.

On Aug. 24, quite unexpectedly, a civilian was ushered into the cell. He began to talk to me matter-of-factly, as if nothing this past year had happened. "The negotiators in Geneva have reached an agreement for peace in Laos. Soon you will be going home."

I had been a prisoner for 17 months, almost a year of it locked inside a dark hole.

This story was partly prepared in my living room in Laurel, Md., on a brisk, windy day. And a sunny one, too, with warm light falling in big pools on the carpet and Betty doing housework in the kids' room.

The sun still hurts my eyes, and I wear dark glasses during days like this. I was hospitalized for some time, partially because of a bad throat: I guess I talked so much after being silent so long that the unused muscles just gave way. I have some scars from being hit by wing fragments, and I tire easily, but that's temporary.

Worst now is all that I missed: Barbara was married; Larry got his driver's license; Elaine sprouted from child to young woman. I have a lot of catching up to do.