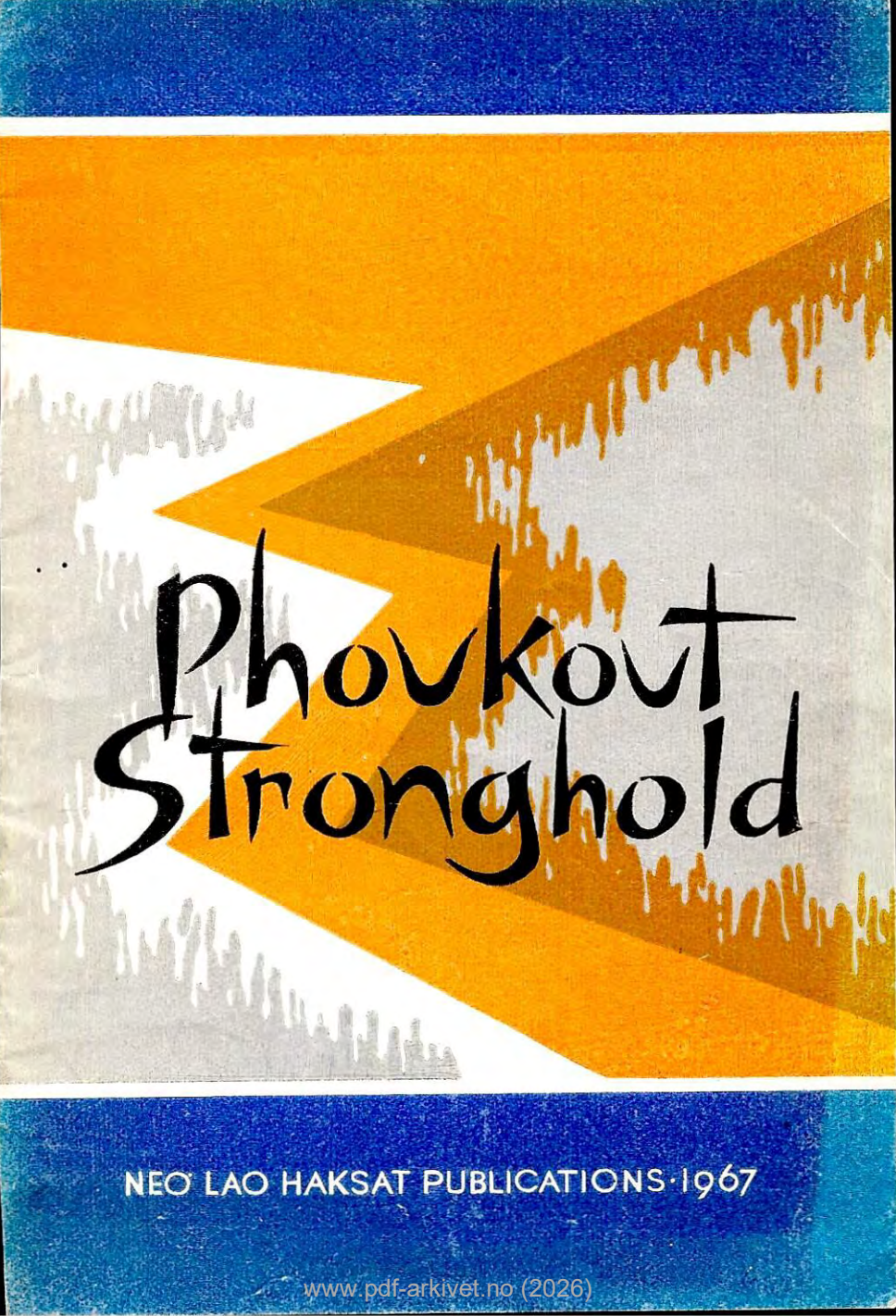




Phoukout Stronghold

NEO LAO HAKSAT PUBLICATIONS 1967

PHOUKOUT
Stronghold

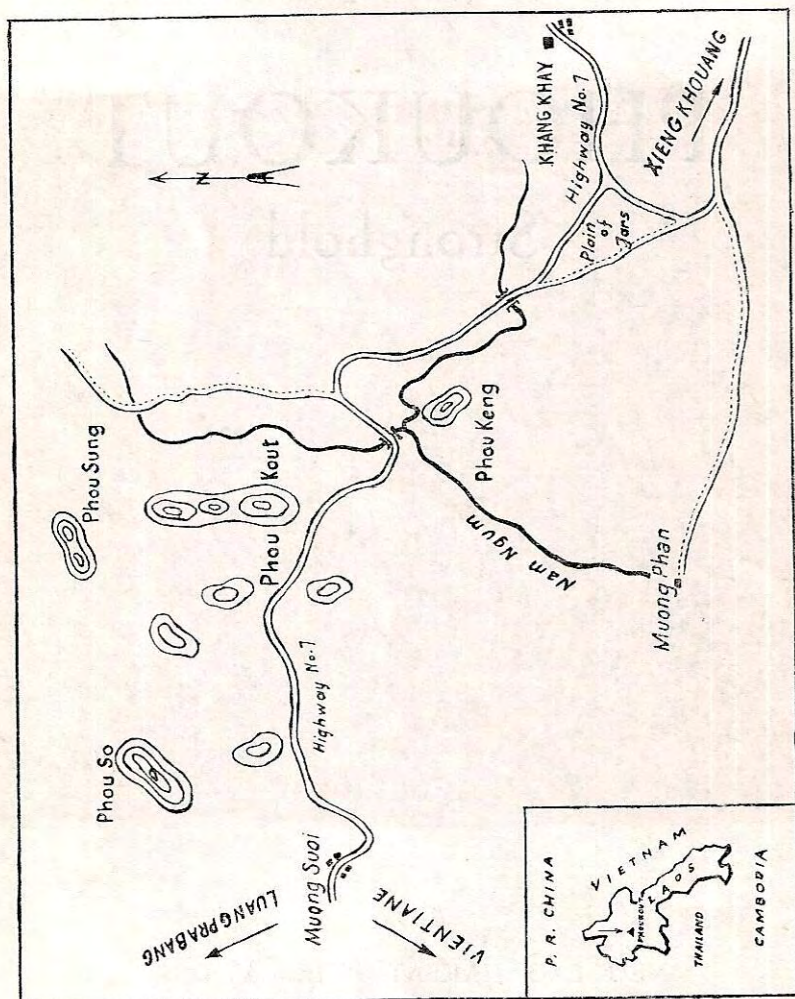
PHOUKOUT

Stronghold

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Phoukout area



I — The gate-way to the Plain of Jars

IF the strategic importance of Laos has prompted the Americans to compare it to "a sword deep in the heart of Indochina and Southeast Asia" the Plain of Jars undoubtedly occupies a first-class military position in this land of mountains and forests. Littered with hundreds of stone receptacles, vestiges of an ancient civilization of the bronze age* it has always served as a resistance base against foreign aggression.

* These jars are believed to contain alcohol in celebrations to entertain victorious armies at that time.

Situated on the Muong Phuon plateau, it commands important roads in Upper Laos and, therefore, plays a fundamental part in the security of North Indochina. No wonder that the U.S. imperialists have hatched the scheme of invading the Plain of Jars since it became part of the liberated zone controlled by the Neo Lao Haksat and the patriotic neutralist forces in January 1961. Their offensives, however, have been smashed by violent counter-attacks.

After repeated failures, in May 1964 the American imperialists urged Kongle, who had deviated from genuine neutralism at Washington's instigation, to occupy Muong Suoi illegally with the help of troops of the right-wing faction in preparation for fresh moves.

Muong Suoi* lies 16km west of Phoukout, a flat, saddle-like mountain stretching north-southward, some 2km north of Highway No. 7 where it is cut by the Nam Ngeum river. With mount Phou Soung 8km to the north and mount Phou Keng 9km to the southeast, Phoukout forms the massive western gate of the Plain of Jars.

The enemy installations at Muong Suoi, some 500 to 800m from the first Phoukout defence lines, consist of watch-towers, a dense network of casemates, bunkers, barbed-wire entanglements, trenches and dug-outs, and an airfield with many fighter and transport planes. There used to be 6,000 Lao mercenaries under the direct command of American "advisers", an artillery unit

* At 16km west of the Plain of Jars, 2km long and 1,396m above sea-level.

with several dozen 75mm and 155mm cannons and even a unit of mercenary troops from Thailand.

In May 1964, the U.S. aggressors began to attack the liberated zone and particularly Phoukout with Thailand-based planes. With the so-called Kongle neutralist forces, troops of the right-wing faction and Thailand artillery well under their command, they had been stepping up provocations and attacks. But, firm as a rock, the "steel mountain" had already held out for a thousand days and a thousand nights under a deluge of fire and steel.

II — Phoukout in face of enemy attacks

ON May 19, 1964, after pounding Phoukout with artillery and air force, the enemy launched successive attacks, deploying each time one or several companies. This first trial of strength cost him one hundred casualties and 65 weapons.

In July 1964, in coordination with Operation *Sam Son* (Three Arrows) on Highway No. 7, three battalions, supported by 105mm and 155mm batteries at Muong Suoi and Thailand-based planes, renewed the offensive action. They fell into an ambush just in front of the first Phoukout defence lines and were taken unawares on both flanks. A number were killed on the spot, the

remnants — officers and men — ran helter-skelter like rabbits for their lives. Hard pressed, they either jumped on mines or encountered guerillas who put a number of them out of action. The Americans and the puppets suffered disastrous losses : 300 wiped out, 178 weapons and many tons of munitions captured by the Liberation forces.

A new fierce offensive involving 7 infantry battalions, supported by tanks, heavy artillery and jets was started against Phoukout in December 1964. In spite of an intensive bombing, the first attack was repelled. A second assault with a force a hundred times greater than that of the defenders was mounted against Peak No 1 held by a 3-member group under the command of platoon-leader Kham Loong. Though a trench was lost, the people's fighters resisted unflaggingly and cleverly, using grenades, bayonets and rifle-butts. Boiling with hatred at the thought of his parents murdered and his homeland trodden down by the aggressors, Kham Loong though deafened by bombs and shells, kept stimulating his men with his example. Finally the attackers scampered, leaving their dead behind.

For four days running, the patriotic neutralists, fighting side by side with the people's liberation forces, beat off twenty attacks. The adversary readjusted his plan. Giving up his tactics of head-on attacks, he now tried to isolate Phoukout from Phou Keng and Phou Soung. The people's forces let the enemy troops move deep into the battlefield and then hurled mobile units which cut them into pieces, thus stopping a twelve-day offensive, wiping out 300 men, capturing 40 and seizing hundreds of weapons of all calibres.

In November 1965, U.S. artillery and Thailand-based planes rained bombs and shells on Phoukout. Every inch of land of the people's forces' position was literally churned up. No blade of grass was let standing. Several underground defence-works were ripped open. However, two infantry battalions, supported by 105mm guns failed to turn this havoc to account. The Phoukout garrison fought valiantly to welcome with its exploits the historical Alliance Conference between the Neo Lao Haksat and the Patriotic Neutralist forces in October 1965. Its young A.A. units confronted the U.S. Air Force without flinching. The people's forces put 200 enemy troops out of action, seized 70 weapons, and downed 18 planes, of which the 200th crashed on Lao territory.

On the occasion of this victory, the Neo Lao Haksat Central Committee with Prince Souphanouvong as its chairman, the Lao People's Liberation Army High Command and the local administration and organizations sent a delegation to Phoukout to congratulate the victorious troops and the population to whom a First Class Liberation Order was awarded. The most outstanding unit, the one that brought down the 200th American plane was honoured with the same award. On behalf of his comrades, its leader said: "We owe this great honour to the clear-sighted leadership of the Neo Lao Haksat Central Committee and to the ingenious strategy of the Lao People's Liberation Army High Command. We pledge to heighten our vigilance, to fight still more resolutely for the defence of Phoukout and for making our contribution to defeating the 'special war' of the American aggressors and their henchmen."

On this occasion, Phoukout received the glorious "steel mountain" title.

On February 4, 1966, the enemy started a large-scale operation, committing to battle 7 infantry battalions and a unit of 105mm guns supported by a Thailand 155mm gun-unit, armoured cars and many American planes, among them T.28's. The Phoukout fighters showed remarkable sang-froid. With them was their political commissar whom they never missed in the most dangerous places and at the most critical moments. Loved and respected by all, he was a very popular figure with clear-cut features, his never failing smile, his forefinger or his fist cutting the air when he spoke in public.

The defenders hurled grenades and opened fire only when the aggressors were less than 30 metres away. The mercenaries precipitately fell back. But, threatened by the pistols of American "advisers" and their own officers, they began again to press forward in an attempt to occupy Peak No. 1 and take Peaks Nos. 2 and 3 by an outflanking movement. Hit by a rain of fire, the combatants on Peak No. 1 held out firmly, catching enemy grenades before they exploded and tossing them back.

While the battle was raging, news of victories flowed in from other battlefields, which heartened our troops and instilled in them fresh ardour and energy: the terrorist raid against Muong Ngan and Muong Phan had been foiled; the Xieng Khouang local armed forces had put the mobile grouping No. 13 out of action; those at Muong Sai, Upper Laos, had cleared the Tong Sen resistance pocket held by the "special forces" recruited from among the national minorities, equipped,

trained and commanded by the Americans; the Liberation forces of Pheng Deng-Muong Caou in Attopeu, Lower Laos, had fought off a terrorist raid, wiping out over 300 mercenaries.

An enemy unit rushed towards Peak No.1 and fell upon a section of a trench. It encountered a bitter bayonet counter-attack. Though seriously wounded in the leg, Thao Vieng, one of the veterans of the Liberation troops at Phoukout, stayed at his commanding post. Kham Bay, a platoon-leader of the Patriotic Neutralist Forces, whose wound was bleeding profusely, shouted the oath to "fight till his last breath to defend Phoukout". Before dying, he told the group leader who followed him, "Fight till your last drop of blood side by side with the comrades of the Lao People's Liberation Army to safeguard Phoukout. Tell my mother that I'd fought in the ranks of the Patriotic Forces." "Long live the Lao revolution", "Long live Prince Souphanouvong" were his last words.

Stimulated by those examples, the defenders of Peak No. 1 drove back all the adverse attacks.

The Phoukout command undertook a skilful diversion move. A detachment of the people's forces infiltrated into the heart of Muong Suoi, and harassed the enemy rear by repeated attacks in several places. To ward off this constant threat to his base, the enemy had to withdraw part of his offensive forces, whose morale was on the downgrade owing to ever-increasing losses. The defenders now appeared, now disappeared to turn up unexpectedly, continuously changing their firing positions and making use even of shell and bomb craters as entrenchments.



One of the targets for 250,000 U.S. shells and 6,000 bombs in the region of Phoukout



Millions of cubic metres of wood
for the building of defence works



In the 1st front-line



Attack through the forest





A.A. battery in action



One of the A.A. units
at Phoukout which have
downed 29 U.S. planes



Charles Tofferi, captain, piloting an F.104, brought down at Phoukout on Oct. 20, 1966 (the 418th U.S. plane downed over Laos since May 17, 1964)





The "lighter of Phoukout": a wonderful invention

The people are tending "vegetable gardens for the Phoukout fighters"





Mother Dam Dzi is preparing traditional medicines for the wounded at Phoukout

The People's Army help the people gather in the crops



The battle ended after 30 days and 30 nights. Struck in front, from behind and on the flanks, the enemy had to withdraw with heavy losses in men (700 killed, 50 taken prisoner, 35 surrendered) and in materials (5 recoilless cannons, 2 mortars, one bazooka, 6 heavy machine-guns, 4 light machine-guns, 100 rifles, 2 tanks and more than 10 planes).

For its high fighting spirit, the Phoukout garrison received from the Lao People's Liberation Army High Command a symbolic gift together with a letter of congratulation which read: "Recently on the occasion of the week of support to the Lao people's struggle against U.S. aggression, the South Viet Nam National Front for Liberation Central Committee made a present of two transistors to the Lao Liberation troops, a booty from the Binh Gia battle. We hand over to you this priceless gift which is an expression of the militant solidarity between the Lao and Vietnamese peoples, comrades-in-arms on a common front against U.S. imperialism. Phoukout fighters be worthy of this honour."

In a thousand days, the Phoukout combatants fought 200 engagements of various sizes and won splendid victories. They put 1,702 troops out of action (among them 92 prisoners), captured 454 rifles, 5 recoilless cannons, 2 mortars, one bazooka, 6 heavy machine-guns, 14 light machine-guns, 7 radio sets, thousands of tons of ammunition, destroyed 2 tanks, downed 50 jets. With these successes, the Phoukout fighters were honoured with over 150 decorations, conferred either collectively or individually, and many citations.

III — Comparable to “May Du” and “May Deng” trees

EVERY day 150 shells on an average (sometimes up to 5,000) and a large number of bombs were showered on Phoukout by artillery and the air force. On certain days the number of fighter-plane sorties reached the 120-mark. To date, Phoukout received 250,000 shells and more than 6,000 bombs, including phosphorus gaz and napalm bombs. An island in the Plain of Jars with an all-time green vegetation three years before, it is ragged and denuded beyond recognition. Its peak, now six metres lower, has lost its saddle-like shape.

However, like the *May Du* and *May Deng* trees which take roots deep in the soil and resist the most violent storms, the Phoukout defenders still hold out, clinging to their mountain stronghold. With their hands, shovels and spades, they dug a labyrinth of trenches and underground galleries, using "wooden cranes" to bring the earth up. Thousands of cubic metres of wood were brought from low slopes or remote forests to build defence-works. Kitchen, club, stores, dormitories, pigsties, hen-coops, everything was laboriously constructed underground.

Daily life was a succession of tests, one harder than the other. Each bamboo-tube of water could only be obtained at the cost of sweat and sometimes blood. It was no easy job indeed to carry water from the foot to the top of the mountain, along almost vertical ridges. Bomb-craters have been turned into water-reservoirs, and vegetables grown in tiny gardens. The food problem was a thorny one. Owing to supply difficulties, it occurred that the combatants had but rice-soup and salt for five successive days and still, each of them, at each meal, put by a handful of rice into the "anti-U.S. rice-saving pot".

The "Phoukout lighter" was a wonderful "invention": one man pulled a wire wound round the prop of a trench, another kept priming-powder near enough to catch fire from the friction.

Austere as it was, this life was neither gloomy nor dull. On the contrary, it radiated joy, the joy of fighters conscious of the significance of their sacrifice and comforted by the comradeship between those who struggled for a common cause. The veterans of the anti-French

resistance war used to recall that after all this was waged in better conditions: hadn't they now beds, mats, lamps, tobacco and even flowers?

Wild flowers grew in profusion. They stood proud and beautiful, in vases made out of empty shells. They added a colourful note to celebrations of victories held in scorched sites still smoking of gun-powder. On these occasions the melodious sound of the *khen* timed with that of empty bullets and ammunition boxes beaten by way of gong and drum, accompanied the rhythm of the *lam vong* dance of hilarious officers and men who disturbed the still of the night with their loud "hu, hu".

A song composed collectively in an evening party says :

*We've left our village,
The forest is now our home,
The moon and stars are our lamps,
The tree foliages, our mats.
Yet, cheerful is the soldier's life.*

.....

*Morning and evening we eat
Without bowls, without spoons.
Haven't we got five fingers?
Hard is our life,
Yet, how beautiful!*

It is in this atmosphere of inalterable optimism that flourishes revolutionary heroism. Faithful to the indomitable traditions of the Lao people and Liberation Army, the Phoukout fighters have glorified the example of national hero Thao Tu of the Xieng Khouang Meo minority. Bravery and intelligence

incarnate, he fought heroically in the anti-French war (1946-1954) and in 1959 when at the head of the Pathet Lao Second Battalion, he broke through the enemy encirclement in the Plain of Jars.

The Phoukout units have pushed forward the "Three well's" drive: fight well, produce well, and discharge every responsibility well. From this emulation movement have emerged outstanding figures.

Boun Mi, fourteen years old, became a liaison agent after the enemy had massacred his parents and burnt down his school. At Phoukout, they called him Boun Mi Noi, Little Boun Mi. He had ten engagements to his credit. In a fight, his platoon leader was killed. Moved to tears, Boun Mi Noi seized the machine-gun out of his hands and fired at the aggressors, killing five of them. The adversary kept on assaulting. A machine-gun at Boun Mi's side was silenced by a mortar shell which had hit the gunner. To save the precious weapon, nimble as a squirrel, he jumped on it, and though having never in his life learnt how to handle a machine-gun, he worked it as he had seen his elders do. The gun spat a deadly fire. The attackers were forced back. It was with his boldness that little Boun Mi gradually won the admiration of his mates. Thao Tuot was a guerilla from the native region of Ong Keo and Kommadam (Bolovent Plateau, Lower Laos), heroes in the struggle against the French colonialists. In the ranks of the Lao People's Liberation Army, he did the modest yet difficult job of a cook at Phoukout. "All duties entrusted by the people and the fatherland are glorious," he said. In battles, he attended to the wounded without in the least neglecting his main job—

cooking. He sought as best he could to improve the menu of his unit by encouraging his comrades to help him grow vegetables, rear pigs and poultry. Once, while carrying rice to his comrades, he saw an enemy group advancing towards him. Calmly, he lay in wait until the group came within the range of the machine-gun he brought with him to open fire. Thinking they were caught in an heavy ambush, the mercenaries sprang to their feet. Thao Tuot collected the booty and went on with his work. He tried to escape from journalists' interviews with a toss of his head and a disarming smile and excuse: "What on earth have I to tell you?"

The people of Phoukout still speak with pride of the exploit of "The Seven on Peak No. 1" commanded by Non Kone from Savannakhet. This group undertook the dangerous task of infiltrating into an invested area to pin down attacking forces. Suffering from cold and hunger for two days, it successfully carried out a diversionary operation, harassing 5 companies of puppet troops, which enabled other Liberation units to encircle the enemy.

IV — In the people's heart

MOTHER Dam Di lives a little way off Phoukout. With the liberation of her village Le, the Neo Lao Haksat also freed this old woman from misery and humiliation. Her buffalo, the only property and support of her family, was taken away by the rightist faction's troops who had come many a time to plunder her of her meagre stock of rice. The Neo Lao Haksat has brought her a more decent life and the dignity and the pride of a free citizen. No wonder that she feels deeply attached to the new regime and to its defenders, the soldiers of the People's Liberation Army. Whenever she sees one of them

strolling in the village, whether she knows him or not, she shouts at the top of her voice:

"Hey! laddie! I didn't see you for ages. Where did you hide yourself?..."

She talks and talks and there is no end to her flow of words. She gladly announces the laddie's arrival to her neighbours and asks him stay for dinner. When he takes leave, she never fails to slip into his pack some pods of chilli, vegetables, or sometimes even a chicken, after having according to the tradition tied a thread round his wrist as a blessing. Mother Dam Di always has one or two Phoukout soldiers who passed by as guests. Her home has been named "First-line reception centre", then "Military first-aid station" as an appreciation of the care and the effectiveness of the traditional medicines she gives to the sick.

Mother Dam Di is only one of the many examples of the Lao people's affection, particularly the Xieng Khouang people's, for the defenders of Phoukout. In defiance of hardships and difficulties, the people carry to Phoukout salt, rice, logs of wood and ammunition. They make valuable contributions to the building of defence-works, the repairing of roads and the evacuation of the wounded. In the neighbouring villages, they launch "agricultural drives for Phoukout" and tend "vegetable-gardens for Phoukout". People of villages at three or four days' walk from Phoukout pay cheer-up visits to the defenders of the stronghold and bring them presents. Particularly on traditional festive days processions of women and young girls climb up to the mountain top to offer glutinous rice cakes, embroidered

handkerchiefs, and many other things of their own making. Letters flowing in from Upper, Middle and Lower Laos show that Phoukout focuses the attention of the whole country.

American crimes cannot but cement the solidarity between the people and the army. In the neighbourhood of Phoukout, hundreds of houses were razed to the ground, many pagodas destroyed, hundreds of people massacred. Bonzes have doffed the saffron robe for the rifle. The people unstintedly spend money on the guerillas and their activities. The Phon Than guerillas are expert in laying mines and sniping mercenaries. To support the Phoukout fighters, they more than once carried sabotage work deep into the enemy rear. Their leader who lost a leg in an engagement is still at his command post.

Xinma, a young guerilla of the Meo minority, with distinguished leading ability, was promoted political commissar of her village militia. Six women of the militia-platoon of village X. put 10 enemy troops out of action, captured 2, seized 6 rifles, 10 grenades and hundreds of cartridges.

The inhabitants dig trenches, set thousands of spiked bamboo traps and carry out agitation work among the enemy.

At spare time, the Phoukout army men leave their stronghold to visit the people. They teach the guerilla how to best use mines and rifles and to shoot planes with infantry weapons. They help the people bring in the crops and teach the children patriotic songs.

Phoukout is the pride of the nation. It is a symbol of the great national struggle of the Lao people and

their armed forces against the U.S. imperialists and their hirelings, a struggle which is the favourite theme of many songs like the following extemporized by the people :

High is Phoukout, but it's none too high as compared with the morale of the Army.

Pure is the water of Nam Ngeum, but it isn't as pure as the people's heart.

.

A stake does not made a hedge.

Without the people-army solidarity, Laos will sink.

Under the banner of the Neo Lao Haksat

We'll win victory after victory.

