

The Sears catalog

Reflections on Mail-Order Tradecraft

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The announcement from Sears last January that it was shutting down its catalog sales operations provoked a wave of nostalgia among those of us who had grown up with this mail-order enterprise. Some of my colleagues noted that the Sears "Wish Book" was not only rural America's alternative to the big-city department store, but it was also the lifeline to American goods for many serving abroad. Long before Lands End, L.L. Bean, Talbots, or anyone of the dozens of other catalogs which now clog our pouches and overseas postal system, Sears kept us in clothes and commodities. And, if we had good tailors, Sears sometimes provided the models to inform the local craftsmen on contemporary styles.

My reflections, however, were of a different order. When it is written, the history of the Sears catalog also deserves a small chapter on the contribution it made to intelligence operations.

Low-Level Agents

In September 1966, I arrived in Hue, Vietnam, to take over direction of a small, bilateral operation with the Vietnamese that involved running agents into the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Secret Zones in western Thua Thien and Quang Tri Provinces along the Laos border. It was a limited activity, not as structured, complex, or spooky as the Special Forces' operation I had been working on the Cambodian border for the preceding six months. The agents I inherited were a mixed lot. Some were highland peasants from the Nam Hoa and Ashau Valley areas; many were Bru, one of the smaller Montagnard groups living around Khe Sanh and Lang Vei and as far into eastern Laos as Tchepone. From an operational perspective, however, they all had two things in common.

First, they had some natural access to the areas of our interest. Whether as hunters, rattan gatherers, aloe wood collectors, or charcoal makers, they had a good reason to travel in the Secret Zones and the Ho Chi Minh trail complex in the Vietnam/Laos border area. They were our eyes and ears on the ground, recruited to report on Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army troops and facilities they encountered in their travels in the jungles. Most of the agents were organized in small nets of a half-dozen under a principal agent who, in turn, was controlled by a Vietnamese agent handler with an American case officer counterpart. The American case officer typically worked with two or three agent handlers.

Second, most of the agents lived in what anthropologists called "non-monetized local economies." These were essentially barter economies where the piaster, the national currency, was largely incidental to local life. The typical financial incentives that sustained agent operations in the lowlands were only marginally relevant to these highlanders. My predecessors had tried to recruit agents with the offer of a few hundred piasters for a 10- to 15-day mission into a Secret Zone, but the proposals either were rebuffed or resulted in more fraudulent operations than real ones. While the Bru were indifferent to the recruitment attempts, a couple of the enterprising Vietnamese agent handlers contrived some fictitious agents who looked quite good on paper. The agent handlers had salted away several thousand piasters before their scam was questioned and they were relieved.

Good Results

My immediate predecessor was more successful with the proposal to pay the agents with rice and other commodities. Initially, there was considerable enthusiasm for this arrangement, and several local

leaders signed on as principal agents with the agreement to recruit folk from their villages as agents. By late spring of 1966, there were several nets operating and providing a steady flow of information. While not always precise—we never mastered debriefing in Bru nor matching our maps with the Bru command of topography—this intelligence seemed to be welcomed by provincial authorities, by our Special Forces colleagues at the camp in Khe Sanh, and by the commanders under the Third Marine Amphibious Force, the major US command in the region. Occasionally, and always belatedly, word would also come back from the Air Force that pilots had seen secondary explosions on one of our reported targets. This was usually good for a bonus bag or two of rice.

Payment Problems

This was the state of things when I arrived. The nets were productive, but there were problems. The Vietnamese district chiefs in Nam Ho and Khe Sanh were exacting their tribute from these operations and were claiming a third of the rice and food we were providing. Attempts to dislodge them were futile, and the principal agents were less than enthusiastic about pushing their agents into new areas when their “earnings” were steadily eroding under these extractions.

One of my case officers working out of the village of Khe Sanh, whose cover depended upon maintaining a modicum of cooperation from the Vietnamese district chief, had supplemented the rice payments with bottles of Johnny Walker to both the village chiefs and the agents. This worked well for a while, but two missionaries involved in a Bible translation project for the Bru took strong exception to this practice. It was bad enough that the Bru brewed their own jungle toddy, but it was far worse that Americans would contribute to their debasement with higher levels of distillation. Word soon percolated down from Saigon that we would not use Johnny Walker for incentives.

Shortly after my arrival, I conferred with my case officers and the Vietnamese agent handlers to discuss how we might pick up the operational pace. I was particularly keen on pushing the agents deeper into

Laos and keeping them out longer, especially in the areas along the Ho Chi Minh trail. My colleagues were skeptical that even doubling the rice payments would have that much effect. More cooking oil was suggested, but we doubted that would be that much more persuasive. B195, the best of the Vietnamese agent handlers—the only one who was conversational in Bru—noted that he had recently bought a couple of canvas “be-bop” hats as bonuses for a principal agent and these had been big hits.

Sears to the Rescue

This got me thinking about an alternative scheme to pay the agents. My wife had just sent me a Sears catalog through the APO. It was sitting on the corner of my desk. I started thumbing through it while we were talking, and it suddenly struck me that this might be the answer to our problems. That evening I sat down with the catalog and flagged several pages of clothes and other wares that I thought might appeal to the agents. I then created a basic pay scale, indexing items to the length and inherent danger of a mission. The following morning I sat down with B195 and his case officer and proposed they take the Sears catalog with them for the next meeting with the principal agent whose net was working between Lang Vei and Tchepone. I gave them my recommended pay schedule and mission index, but I also suggested that, in the best of Sears fashion, they should let the principal agent browse the catalog. They departed for Khe Sanh and I set off to scrounge another copy of the Sears catalog as a reference for the base.

Three days later my communicator came in with a message from the case officer. He and B195 had met with the principal agent and the Sears proposal was a resounding success, albeit many of my suggested offerings had been supplanted by substitutions from the principal agent’s catalog browsing. Would I please send six boys’ size 10/12 and 14/16 red velvet blazer vests with brass buttons—the Bru were of small stature. Each would be payment for a 20-day mission. Several boys’ stamped leather cowboy belts were also requested.

Satisfied Customers

I immediately sent the order to Sears. Three weeks later the package arrived, and I pouched it to the case officer in Khe Sanh. The response of the agents exceeded even our optimistic expectations. The vests were a great hit. The agents paraded around the village in them, and we could not have organized a better recruiting drive had we passed out gold. While this showy display of Sears sartorial splendor posed some security problems that troubled me later, there was also no question of the renewed enthusiasm for jungle missions of longer duration. Within days, I posted another order to Sears. This one also included an order for a large bra. I was quite puzzled by this and only discovered much later that the bra, slung over a bamboo pole, was used to delicately harvest a jungle fruit.

We continued the Sears incentive program for several months. Intelligence production rose sharply as we expanded our coverage into new areas, and we received consistently high evaluations on the agent reporting. The Vietnamese agent handlers negotiated their own incentives, and they soon began sporting blue denim CPO jackets, a new mark of esprit. While I was greatly pleased with the results, I also found myself embroiled in a serious disagreement with our budget people who had never blessed this irregular use of operational funds. For a while, I feared that my contribution to agent handling was

going to come a cropper under the auditor's eye; the presumption that I was running some scam held powerful sway. It took my most persuasive operational arguments and some creative accounting before all parties were pleased.

Phasing Out

The deployment of marine units into the Khe Sanh area in Spring 1967 forced a major change in our operations. The *modus vivendi* we seemed to enjoy with the North Vietnamese forces was rapidly replaced by an increasing series of hostile engagements leading up to the major battles of Hill 881 and 881 North, harbingers of the siege of Khe Sanh the following year. Marine reconnaissance teams gradually replaced our agent efforts. As both bombing and firefights increased in the area, even the red vests ceased to be powerful incentives to venture deep into the jungle.

Although I continued to experiment with the Sears catalog with my lowland agents, it never had the appeal we found in the mountains. The catalog, and my band of red-vested agents, are now both history, a history that briefly intersects in one bright moment of tradecraft and the market spirit.