

U.S. Falsely Reported 81 GI Deaths

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More details on clandestine U.S. military activities in Southeast Asia emerged yesterday as the Pentagon disclosed that 81 American servicemen had been killed in Laos and Cambodia since 1965 on secret intelligence-gathering missions.

However, because of the sensitive nature of these missions into countries with which the United States was not at war, the deaths were reported to the families of the men, to Congress, and in official announcement as having taken place inside South Vietnam.

Defense Department spokesman Jerry W. Friedheim, in revealing for the first time the location of these combat fatalities, said that the false reports were discovered Monday in a continuing review of Vietnam war statistics that had been provided to Congress in May and June.

These reports to Congress, which included inaccurate information about U.S. air operations and concealed a massive secret air war in Cambodia during 1969-70, have touched off concern among many lawmakers about the validity of official information being provided to Congress.

As in the case of the false

bombing information, Friedheim indicated that the secrecy of the ground intelligence operations dictated that precautions be taken to prevent public disclosure.

Friedheim said the deaths were recorded and stored in computer files at the Pentagon to keep the overall tally of war casualties accurate, but the men were listed falsely as having been killed in South Vietnam.

Their families, who are now being notified of the true circumstances under which their relatives died were told at first that they were killed "on classified missions along the border of South Vietnam."

The facts in each death were kept in separate Pentagon files.

Pentagon officials, as in the case of the publicly unreported Cambodia bombing, indicated the missions by small teams of Americans—mostly Army Green Berets with some Marines and Air Force personnel—and South Vietnamese were authorized by top civilian administration officials.

Friedheim said that Congress was told yesterday that the Vietnam casualty figures it had were also in error.

He also indicated that at least some "selected" lawmakers on Capitol Hill knew about

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these "covert military reconnaissance activities," but he did not identify them.

The missions in Laos began in the fall of 1965, Friedheim said, and officials said later they ended early in February 1971, and cost 55 American lives. The major South Vietnamese invasion of Laos began Jan. 30, 1971. The missions in Cambodia reportedly ran from 1967 to the end of June, 1970, and took an additional 26 lives. Pentagon officials also say it is possible that at least some of the roughly 1,300 Americans still listed as missing in action may have been on these missions.

Friedheim described the missions as primarily aimed at

watching Communist troop and supply movement along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, gathering information on North Vietnamese base areas inside Cambodia, and assessing the results of then-secret U.S. bombing raids into Laos and Cambodia.

Legislation passed in December, 1969, prohibits U.S. ground combat troops from entering Laos, and the Cooper-Church amendment, approved Jan. 5, 1971, forbids such troops from being committed in Cambodia.

The Pentagon has always officially stated that there were no U.S. "ground combat troops" in these countries when they were not supposed to be, but has consistently said "no comment" when asked over the years whether there were any other types of ground units such as intelligence teams.

The existence of such teams has been an open secret. However, President Nixon on March 6, 1970, sought to quell what he viewed as "intense public speculation to the effect that U.S. involvement in Laos has substantially increased in violation of the Geneva Accords; that American ground forces are engaged in combat in Laos, and that our air activity has had the effect of escalating the conflict.

"Because these reports are grossly inaccurate," the President said, "I have concluded that our national interest will be served by putting the subject into perspective through a precise description of our current activities in Laos."

Mr. Nixon went on to make several points, including, "there are no American ground troops in Laos . . . and no American stationed in Laos has ever been killed in a ground combat operation." The Pentagon, which does not consider these teams as combat units but rather as observation units, did not say what the total number of such U.S. personnel in Laos and Cambodia was.

While new information on ground operations was coming from the Pentagon, Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger discussed the bombing report situation with newsmen after an appearance before the Foreign Operations Subcommittee of the Senate Appropriations Committee.

Schlesinger said the bombing of Cambodia in the 14 months prior to May, 1970, was "authorized at the highest level."

"There was no usurpation of civilian authority," Schle-

singer said. "The entire military command responded to directives from the top."

Schlesinger conceded that erroneous information was given to members of Congress but that accurate records were kept of the Cambodia bombing for those who had a "need to know."

Schlesinger said the information on the strikes, identifying South Vietnam targets, was fed into a data bank for use by personnel in charge of logistics, replacement of ammunition and the like.

When queries came from Capitol Hill, he said, through error "the answers were pumped out from the data bank."

The Defense Secretary appeared before the subcommittee in support of \$1.2 billion in administration requests for military foreign aid.

Schlesinger told the committee that he has no present intention of recommending a request to Congress to continue the bombing in Cambodia after the Aug. 15 fund cutoff deadline passed by Congress.