

Pentagon Acknowledges That Americans Landed at Pnompenh Airport

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Jan. 26 —

The Defense Department acknowledged today that 15 to 20 Americans in civilian clothes landed at Pnompenh airport last night to retrieve two damaged helicopters and take them back to South Vietnam for repairs. The men were disclosed to have been carrying sidearms.

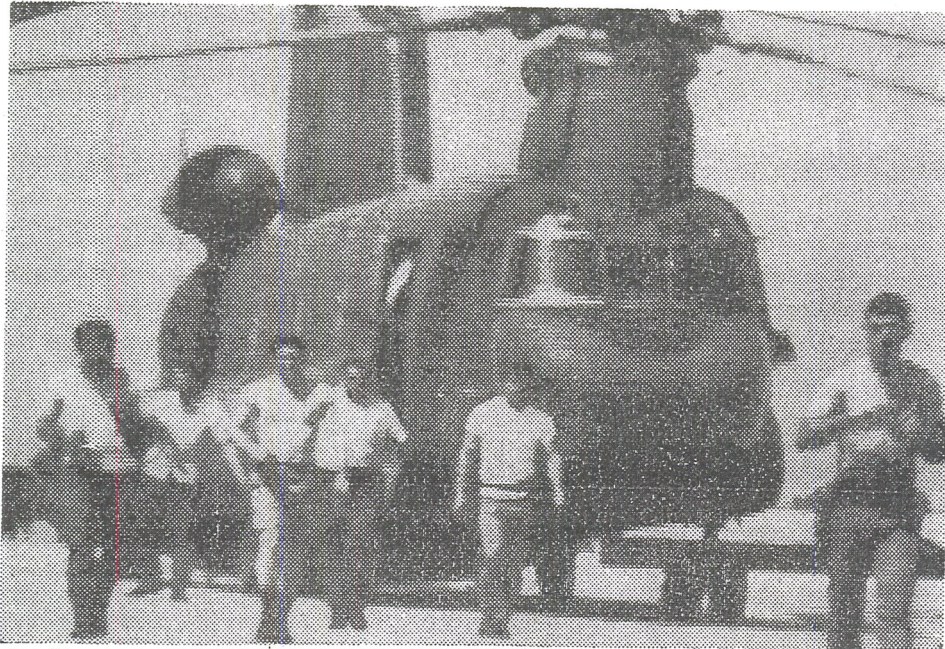
A Pentagon spokesman, responding to questions about a Columbia Broadcasting System report on the episode, acknowledged that the rescue team had landed at Pnompenh in three United States Army helicopters.

He identified the men only as "U. S. personnel," declining to say specifically that they were military men. Pentagon officials also declined to confirm that these men carried weapons or to explain why they were in civilian clothes.

In a report by its correspondent in Pnompenh, Don Webster, C.B.S. quoted a participant as having said the mission was led by a Colonel McKinley and that the men could be seen changing into uniforms or flight suits once they went back into their own aircraft. The pictures showed the men with sidearms.

Defense Department officials indicated that the two recovered helicopters were among six Cambodian helicopters damaged last Friday in an enemy

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TV film frame made at Pnompenh airport shows Americans in civilian clothes leaving one of three copters in which group arrived from South Vietnam after foe attacked field.



C.B.S. Evening News with Walter Cronkite

Americans on the field. They took away two helicopters damaged in attack for repairs.

* See NYTimes, 29 Jan 71, Alvin Shuster, paragraphs 2 and 4.

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raid on the airport.

The network reported the disabled aircraft had no nationality markings, but had tail numbers like those used by the United States Army. C. B. S. said there were eight such "anonymous aircraft" at the Pnompenh airport, in addition to the six damaged Cambodian helicopters.

From time to time there have been reports of unmarked American-made helicopters flying spotter missions in Cambodia.

The Defense Department, in a three-sentence statement, did not identify whose helicopters had been rescued. It said that initial reports from the American command in Saigon indicated the rescue team was "on the ground about one hour while [the men] rigged the damaged helicopters for recovery."

Defense officials said the American team flew into Pnompenh in three helicopters. Two were huge, banana shaped Chinook CH-47's capable of lifting the smaller disabled craft back to Vietnam.

Both the Defense Department and State Department were at pains once again today to emphasize that the Administration was abiding by Congressional prohibitions against the introduction of American ground troops or advisers into Cambodia.

State Department officials, reportedly concerned about Congressional sensitivity to increased American involvement, were understood to have blocked attempts by the Defense Department to station 50 members of a military equip-

ment delivery team at the American Embassy in Pnompenh.

Civilian officials said that the State Department had insisted that the team stationed in Pnompenh permanently be not more than 16 men and the Pentagon eventually accepted that limit.

Considerably more military personnel, State Department officials said, will be sent into Pnompenh on temporary duty to assist with the delivery of American military equipment to the Cambodian forces and to provide an accounting for Congress that the equipment is properly delivered.

On the average, officials said, 20 or more Americans from the military command in Saigon are in Cambodia on temporary assignment on any given day. The recovery of the Cambodian helicopters for repairs in South Vietnam was cited by American officials as an example of their duties.

The State Department spokesman today took a more conservative view than the Defense Department on whether it was permissible for the United States to provide instructors for the Cambodian Army in the use of American equipment.

Yesterday, Jerry W. Freidheim, the Pentagon spokesman, said that instructors were permissible though the Administration had no plans to send them to Cambodia. Today Robert J. McCloskey, the State Department spokesman, declined under questioning to confirm that interpretation of Congressional restrictions. State Department officials said later that they would let the Pentagon take the lead in justifying that stand to Congress.