

U.S. Copter Pilots Taking Some of Worst Fire of War

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By RALPH BLUMENTHAL

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KHESANH, South Vietnam, Feb. 11—"I've been flying for six months, took my first hit yesterday, and since then I've taken 13," said Maj. Burt Allen of Obion, Tenn., as he brought his bullet-pierced helicopter in for a safe landing here today.

Another pilot, his pant leg torn by a bullet that had punctured the floor board of his light observation helicopter, stepped out of his craft dazed and wet eyed as its blades turned slowly to a stop. He did not say a word as fellow pilots clapped him on the shoulder and said "Wow!"

The helicopter crews at this base, which provides most of the air cover and airlift services for the South Vietnamese troops advancing into Laos farther west, were tense and excited today as they returned from what some of them described as the heaviest anti-aircraft fire they had ever seen in Indochina.

10 Down in 2 Days

At least four helicopter were reported shot down today in the Laotian border region, and yesterday, sources here said, at least six were shot down in Laos.

The enemy has also been firing rockets and mortars at some allied installations well east of the Laotian border in the last few days. Last night Vandergrift Artillery Base on Route 9, the main east-west road to Laos, was hit by rockets, but no casualties were reported.

Khesanh, a sprawling base set on a plateau overlooked by lime-green hills a few miles from the Laotian border, has been spared so far. But as one colonel here put it: "They have the capability. I'm surprised they've waited so long."

Craft Hit, Not the Pilot

It was after a fierce 77-day enemy shelling siege that Khesanh was abandoned by marines in the spring of 1968.

The anti-aircraft fire from enemy positions north of Route 9 in Laos has been considerably heavier than expected. "It's the heaviest in all of Indochina, more even than North Vietnam," said a helicopter commander here.

"The flak was so thick I

could walk on it," said one pilot, who, like most, asked that his name not be used to avoid frightening his family.

When another helicopter pilot was asked, "Were you hit?" he replied: "Nah, I ain't been hit once. My ship's been hit a lot though."

"We had a hundred percent, seven choppers hit out of seven," said Major Allen, the pilot whose craft was hit 13 times yesterday and today.

Every landing zone where American helicopters have dropped South Vietnamese

troops has been "hot"—the source of enemy fire—officers here said.

Three other heavily armed Cobra helicopter gunships and a light observation helicopter were shot down in Laos yesterday, authoritative sources at Khesanh said today.