

Cambodian Foray After a Month: From Arms

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, May 29—The allied military campaign in Cambodia is a month old.

The tangible fruits of yesterday, according to the military statisticians, were: 11,949 individual weapons, 2,145 crew-served weapons, 1,073 tons of ammunition, 4,996 tons of rice, 309 motorized vehicles, 14.9 tons of medical supplies, 10 hospitals, 2,807 gallons of gasoline and 1,995 gallons of oil.

These are the key items, not included are such as were contained in the United States Army communique today: 2,000 spools of thread, 500,000 buttons and five bolts of flannel. The price the allies paid in human terms to capture it all—the dollar cost has not been calculated—was, as of yesterday, 751 killed and 3,083 wounded; 227 of the dead and 847 of the wounded were Americans.

In pursuit of the booty, the

allied forces said they had killed 9,658 North Vietnamese and Vietcong soldiers. In terms of the old criteria for judging success, the "kill ratio," the results on paper were—to use a military phrase—outstanding.

Allied officials have dutifully included the word "indicated" before the number of enemy soldiers listed as killed each day. The fact is that they do not know how many have been killed.

Estimates and Body Counts

The daily figure is based on both estimates and actual body counts. Skeptics contend that the estimates, and perhaps even the body counts, are exaggerated. Those with the opposite view believe that there are far more enemy dead in hidden graves than allied troops were able to find.

Regardless, the spokesmen say, the body count is not important to the operation because it was the caches of supplies that the allied forces were most interested in.

President Nixon's original

argument — that the supreme Communist military headquarters, the Central Office of South Vietnam, or COSVN, was the paramount plume—has faded from the arguments for the invasion even though, on the average of every other day, some field commander says his forces have captured at least part of it and sensational news dispatches result.

Using comparisons, the amount of seized material is impressive: enough rifles to arm 34 Vietcong battalions; enough heavy machine guns, mortars and other crew-served weapons to outfit 28 more battalions; enough rice to feed them and enough ammunition to keep them shooting for a year.

What some military officials concede is that the great bulk of the captured individual weapons are adequate but second-rate SKS rifles and not the standard enemy rifle, the AK-47 automatic; that the 34 battalions they would arm represent less than a fifth of enemy

strength in the southern half of South Vietnam (exclusive of Cambodia) that the ammunition would last them a year "at the current rate of expenditure" which in recent months has been at its lowest average level in two years; that the procurement of rice has never been as much of a problem as its distribution.

In fact, Cambodia just harvested a bumper crop of rice, amid which many enemy units are emplaced.

A key issue haunts those assessing the tangible military benefits: How much enemy materiel was not found and will not be found by the end of June? Almost all confess ignorance.

Evidence of the Impact

There is another unanswered question: What quantity of munitions and supplies did the enemy forces manage to hide in the South Vietnamese countryside before the South Vietnamese and Americans swept into Cambodia?

Some official sources say they are "beginning to get evi-

and Rice to Buttons

dence" of the impact of the Cambodian excursion on the North Vietnamese and Vietcong.

Enemy activity in South Vietnam, they say, is now quite a bit lower than in preceding months. Enemy plans, as stated in captured documents, for periodic upsurges and short-term offensives have not materialized, they add.

Some of the sources concede, however, that enemy troops have always forecast much more than they have carried out. The drop in enemy activity, then, could be a result of an effort to conserve supplies or it could simply be the prudent thing to do. Allied officers do not know.

The sources have also said that there have been signs of sagging morale, food shortages and a breakdown in coordination for five years, including the months just prior to the 1968 Lunar New Year offensive.

The total of supplies captured in a month in Cambodia exceeds the total captured in South Vietnam in all of 1968 and is approaching the total for 1969. That is bound to hurt, the sources say, but they grant that the North Vietnamese logistics system, with its roots in the Soviet Union and Communist China, is geared to make up for such losses. It has done so for the last two years.

Disruption of Logistics

For those skeptical about the captured materiel, there is the argument that the captures are secondary to disruption of the enemy's logistics system.

The skeptics, in turn, note that in 17 days the North Vietnamese secured the Mekong River corridor from Laos to south of Chhlong in Cambodia — an all-weather water route that, if anything, is aided by the monsoon rains that are forecast.

The route is admittedly much more difficult — especially in the rainy season — and more perilous than that from the port of Sihanoukville north, which has been cut. Yet it is far less than hopeless.

The North Vietnamese will have to contend even more with aerial disruption of the Ho Chi Minh Trail through

Laos, but American bombers, even according to allied estimates, have stemmed the flow of war material south by only 20 per cent at most. The bombs cannot do the same to the river supply route.

In dealing with the Cambodian foray, top military men here, to their constant chagrin, must face political considerations. Many are expressing the view that the operation was oversold because of political considerations and is being undercut because of political considerations.

They are being required to hail it publicly as a tremendous strategic victory while they privately believe that the most they have gained is a short-term tactical advantage.

Questions of Policy

When pressed, the military officer in South Vietnam most often falls back on the argument that the military forces are not the policy-making arm of government and that their job is to argue military benefits, not political consequences.

If those who weigh all the factors, political as well as military, cannot balance them and make the right decision, the argument goes, they should not in hindsight blame the military.

If the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Gen. William C. Westmoreland—the Cambodian foray is strikingly similar in grandeur to operations he commanded—were effective advocates of its military worth, the argument goes on, the blame, if there is to be any, should fall on the shoulders of those ineffective in presenting its political detriments.

In the long run, it is contended here, the international political consequences of the Cambodian action will flow from specific decisions by politicians, not soldiers.