

# From a U.S. Helicopter Base: Support for Cambodia

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## AT A U. S. HELICOPTER

BASE, near Cambodia, Jan. 22 — South Vietnamese officers and American "airborne coordinators," flying routinely from this base on a jungled plain in Vietnam, symbolize the direct nature of United States combat support in Cambodia.

The presence of the South Vietnamese, who use American helicopters to maintain contact with their troops and with French-speaking Cambodian forces below, is freely acknowl-

edged by United States officers here. Other aspects of the United States air role in Cambodia were clarified today in a command-sponsored tour for some correspondents to this base near Cambodia. The base is part of a support operation involving two United States Navy helicopter carriers that recently took up positions in the Gulf of Siam. A condition of the visit was that the location of the base, as well as the number of sorties flown and other details deemed of significance to the

enemy, be kept secret for security reasons. The "airborne coordinators" are described as liaison officers between American spotter planes and the South Vietnamese in the helicopters and on the ground. The command spokesman who used the term "airborne coordinator" at the daily Saigon war briefing today conceded that he had never heard of it before in his 19 years in the Air Force.

The United States helicopter base on South Vietnamese territory near Cambodia was established shortly before the South Vietnamese joined the Cambodians in an operation to clear Route 4 between Prom-penh and the vital port of Kom-pong Som last week. The most critical phase of that operation appears now to have ended with the capture by Cambodian troops of the northern entrance to Pich Mil Pass on Route 4 yesterday.

Officers at the helicopter base, including a command spokesman, said that South Vietnamese soldiers "sit in the back seat" of control helicopters and helicopter gunships "to help identify targets under attack."

The United States support is often so close to friendly troops on the ground that the South Vietnamese had to be aboard to keep in touch with their own positions, the Americans explained.

In the past, such close ground-air control has been the characteristic of direct combat support, which the command has been maintaining it has not been providing in Cambodia.

Today, however, with Washington officials beginning to acknowledge the existence of such direct air support, the command in its daily war communique referred for the first time to "air operations" instead of "interdiction," a term—that excluded formerly used it—that excluded combat support operations.

The helicopter base, on a plain near some low hills overlooking the turquoise waters of the Gulf of Siam, is less than a half hour's flying time from Cambodia. The base has one main runway, with helicopters parked alongside it and only simple wooden buildings for command operations. On the nearby beach, Vietnamese fishermen cast their nets, oblivious to the chatter of helicopters coming and going.

**Cleveland 105 Miles Off**  
Contrary to earlier reports, the two helicopter carriers are not the main bases for the helicopters, which operate out of this fixed land base in teams of three—two heavily armed Cobra gunships and a light observation helicopter.

One ship, the landing platform dock Cleveland, is positioned somewhat over five nautical miles off Cambodia. It serves as a helicopter landing zone at sea for refueling or emergencies. Its small rear deck can only accommodate three medium-size helicopters.

The other ship, the helicopter landing platform Iwo Jima, is on station 12 to 20 miles further out of sea. She carries the supplies helicopters fly in to South Vietnamese troops in Cambodia, although United States officials say only nine loads, mainly batteries and flares, have been flown in so far, the bulk of the mission having been combat support.

The Iwo Jima also carries an unspecified number of United States Marine ground combat troops, a routine complement on such amphibious craft that United States officials insist will not be used to fight in Cambodia.

**Some Do Step on Land**  
It was one of the United States logistics officers from the helicopter base who was photographed last week on the ground in Cambodia. The base commander here declined to give that soldier's name today. However, he said such troops often have to step out of the helicopters on the ground "to hand somebody batteries or something." The commander said his men had never been fired on while they were on the ground in Cambodia but the command spokesman said that if they were shot at they would have "the inherent right of self-defense—they would do whatever they had to."