

U.S. News Blackout in Saigon Sought To Keep Even Its Existence Secret

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Feb. 4—For correspondents and military men alike, the recently lifted blackout of news from the northwest corner of South Vietnam was six days of confusion, cloak-and-dagger secrecy and a seemingly endless effort to keep secret even the fact that a news blackout existed.

The first official indication here that a major military operation was under way came last Friday evening when a spokesman from the information office of the United States Military Assistance Command Vietnam telephoned correspondents with the following announcement:

"All military operations in Military Region I are embargoed immediately except for those contained in the MACV daily release. A briefing is scheduled for 1800 tomorrow at MACV headquarters in which military operations and press coverage will be explained in detail.

"Necessary arrangements for a pool [joint press coverage] will be worked out at that time. The embargo will remain in effect until further notice and will be lifted as soon as military security permits. Your cooperation is solicited.

"This announcement constitutes part of the embargo and is not for publication."

Accreditation Imperiled

Thus correspondents were not only barred from mentioning the operations in the north but also forbidden—under threat of loss of accreditation—to mention that they were under restriction.

Loss of accreditation is a serious matter for a correspondent since he loses the right to fly on military planes—often the only means of transport in South Vietnam—the right to attend official briefings and the right to receive mail through the United States mission.

danger of being compromised. Meanwhile 300 American soldiers landed Friday at the abandoned Marine Corps base of Khesanh, near the Laotian border, to prepare the way for elements of the nearly 30,000 United States and South Vietnamese military men in the country's northernmost province of Quangtri.

At the military command on Friday, the operation was under "close hold," command slang for secrecy on a need-to-know basis. Many commanders did not need to know and were thus kept ignorant of early stages of the operation.

On Saturday, with the operation under way in the north since the early hours, the supposedly secret troop movements were being openly discussed in Saigon.

One American soldier in Saigon for the day remarked that he had heard that the South Vietnamese were planning to invade Laos. "Where did you hear that?" he was asked.

"The mama-san who cleans my hootch told me," he said.

Press Cards Shown

The press was briefed on the operation for the first time, at 6 P.M. Saturday, at the Military Assistance Command headquarters at Tansonnhut air base on the outskirts of Saigon. Only one representative was allowed from each publication and correspondents had to show their official press cards, even though the officers knew them all by sight.

The chief of the command's information office, Col. Robert W. Leonard, wearing combat fatigues, and other colonels, also in combat gear, outlined the enemy movements that they said had made the operation necessary and then outlined the allied troop movements in South Vietnam. Slides illustrated the presentations.

No mention was made of any strike across the border into Laos. Repeated question whether such an incursion was planned were turned away by Colonel Leonard with the comment, "We never discuss future operations."

When newsmen persisted that an entire future operation had just been disclosed, and wanted to know whether they could "speculate" about a South Vietnamese move into Laos, Colonel Leonard said "No." After a heated discussion, it appeared agreed upon that reporters could speculate as long as they did not indicate any official support for such speculation.

Meanwhile, the correspondents were to be allowed to witness the operation and to prepare their stories for transmission out of Saigon when the embargo was lifted. Accordingly, about 50 newsmen flew up to Quangtri on Sunday.

There were indications before the directive was issued that something unusual was going on, because military transport flights north were canceled without explanation Friday, as they were again on Saturday. But since Army flights operate on erratic schedules anyway, the first day's cancellations did not attract inordinate attention. In Danang, correspondents picked up rumors by Friday of an impending operation nearby in the northern part of the country and began asking questions about it, triggering fears in the military assistance command that the operation was in

in military transport planes carrying jeeps, artillery, ammunition and other supplies from Saigon to Quangtri.

Despite restrictions, a number of correspondents did alert their home offices on Friday and thereafter, often with cryptic or coded cables, and news dispatches in some papers on Saturday reflected at least a hint of this information.

In the United States and Europe on Sunday morning, newspapers, including The New York Times, the Washington Post and The Observer of London published dispatches originating outside South Vietnam about the operation and speculated on a drive into Laos. On Saturday a news agency distributed a dispatch out of Pnompenh, Cambodia, on the operation.

Complaint by Official

At noon Sunday, a spokesman for the military command telephoned correspondents to complain of violations of the embargo and threatened to withdraw the accreditation of the publications involved if the violations occurred again.

At 5:30 P.M. Sunday, another tightly guarded press briefing on the operation was held, this time at the United States mission's press center auditorium in downtown Saigon. The operation was given a name, Dewey Canyon II, and more troop movements were disclosed.

The embargo, as well as the embargo on the embargo, remained in effect.

Another briefing was held on Monday afternoon. At the briefing on Tuesday, the command spokesman, after the usual report of troop movements, had this word for the press: "It's not shirt-sleeve weather up there. Take plenty of warm clothing."

On Tuesday, correspondents asked the command to release for publication the news that an embargo was in effect, since a Defense Department spokesman, Jerry W. Friedheim, had acknowledged the existence of such an embargo the day before in Washington.

Colonel Leonard said he had no information on that. The embargo remained in effect.

Shortly after noon today, a spokesman for the command telephoned correspondents with a message that began: "The embargo on operations in Military Region I imposed on 30 Jan. for the safety of participating troops will be lifted at 0830 G.M.T. 4 Feb., 1600 Saigon time today."

The statement concluded: "The embargo has served its purpose in that our casualties have been at an absolute minimum and we are now in a position to provide routine coverage of the operation."