

How the Ho Chi Minh Trail Operates

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Feb. 4—As in every year of the Vietnam war, the abatement of the monsoon rains last fall brought a quickening of enemy activity along the spidery track network through Laos that is known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

This time the movement took on new significance: With the closing of the Cambodian port of Kompong Som and other water routes to the Vietnamese Communists and the loss of their Cambodian sanctuaries, the trail became the sole remaining major artery supplying their units in South Vietnam and Cambodia.

Its importance was illustrated by the fact that even the reports this week of an imminent South Vietnamese strike into Laos to cut the trail failed to stem the flow down it, as far as United States intelligence officials could determine.

It was to prevent the lifeline from supplying enemy units in northernmost South Vietnam and possibly to cut the trail itself in Laos that American and South Vietnamese troops last Saturday launched the big operation in Cambodia that was announced officially today.

Constantly Shifting Net

Although it is called a trail, the supply line named after the late North Vietnamese President is actually a constantly shifting, 6,000-mile network of concealed roads and tracks through the eastern Laotian panhandle, with tendrils reaching into South Vietnam and Cambodia.

"The trail is any way the enemy can get down to the South," an Air Force officer said. "The trail is a state of mind, it's a philosophy."

Eyewitness accounts offer considerable evidence that the intense United States bombing has been ineffective against the "legion of porters." Witnesses have reported that "within seconds" after planes attacked, the human traffic resumed its antlike flow as workers filled in craters.

"If someone would make a roadmap of all the Laotian trails the enemy uses," a well-informed United States officer said, "it would be obsolete tomorrow."

Almost no couriers travel the

entire distance. They cover their 10-mile or 20-mile stretch and turn their burdens over to other drivers or porters. They are said to know their stretches of trail intimately.

75,000 in Repair Crew

According to one recent estimate, the Communists have 50,000 troops and supervisors administering the trail network and a force of 75,000 Laotian coolies to make repairs.

"Effective and efficient bombing would be if you could set a man on the ground with an 85-cent plastic explosive and he plants it under a North Vietnamese truck," the official said.

Indications that the North Vietnamese were preparing last fall for another and perhaps intensified supply operation were picked up in September, according to the United States command.

Although command spokesmen, in background briefings before the Cambodian operation was disclosed, left the impression that the supply effort would be the biggest of the war, qualified officials maintained that there was no way of measuring it accurately.

The command spokesmen announced that 90 per cent of enemy supplies reaching South Vietnam were entering through Military Region I, in the north, but they acknowledged under questioning that they did not know whether that represented more supplies in absolute terms than in previous years.

Three Main Routes

After the loss of the water routes and the sanctuaries, the trail network was the only significant line of supply for what is estimated at 400,000 North Vietnamese and other Communist troops and cadres operating in South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.

It was to secure the supply line, the command believes that Communist forces seized the Laotian town of Attapeu on April 30 and Saravane on June 9.

According to the command, the North Vietnamese were using three main infiltration routes into Laos—the northernmost through the Mugia Pass, a second through the Ban Karai Pass halfway between Mugia and the demilitarized zone, and a third just around the western end of the zone.

Once in Laos the supplies

were channeled to the first large base area, identified as 604 by the Americans, near Tchepone. From there some were moved south to another large depot, known as base area 611, and were transported to base area 612 around Saravane, which is described by the command as the focal point of all supplies directed south.

Another large depot, designated as the 613-609 complex, channeled supplies eastward into South Vietnam and southward along the Laotian border into Cambodia.

Further Transport Required

The base areas, to judge from depots uncovered in Cambodia, are vast storage areas hidden in shallow bunkers or stacked up along spidery trails under the concealment of jungle foliage. The areas also contain quarters and defense positions.

From the depots the supplies have to be smuggled in to prepared sites in South Vietnam and Cambodia.

The American response has been to step up the bombing in Laos.

It is conducted mainly by the B-52 Stratofortresses, which carry a load of about 30 tons of 500-pound and 750-pound bombs. Since October 240-million pounds of explosives have been dropped.

In addition, United States pilots have been striking the trail in 300 to 400 runs a day in fighter-bombers and an undisclosed number of attacks by rocket-firing helicopter gunships.

Sensor devices, scattered from the air, register movements of men and vehicles and transmit them to United States intelligence banks.

Officials are reluctant to claim significant success for the bombing campaign. There is no accurate way of measuring how much of the enemy effort is disrupted, knowledgeable officials say.