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The Pace Eases for G.I.'s at Quangtri

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QUANGTRI COMBAT BASE, South Vietnam, Feb. 7 — The allied sweep into the western mountains of South Vietnam to the Laotian border was at the end of its first week today, and there was a feeling here that this may be the last big operation in which American troops will participate.

At Khesanh, where United States marines died by the hundreds in a North Vietnamese siege three years ago, Army troops preparing for a South Vietnamese assault across the border have encountered little resistance.

The two armies, 9,000 Americans and 20,000 South Vietnamese, appear on the surface almost to be ignoring each other in this coordinated operation.

At a forward position within sight of the Laotian mountains one G.I. put it this way the other day: "Let the Vietnamese do their war."

The G.I.'s seem to feel that it is time that the South Vietnamese took some of what the enemy has dished out to Americans here in past years. With derision in his voice one American sergeant yelled at Vietnamese troops unhappily bouncing in trucks through the scrub flats on the way to the border: "Yeah, go get 'em!"

To support the South Vietnamese phase of the operation, American ground combat troops have flown in and been shipped north by boat from such places as Chulai and Cuchi further south.

This afternoon scores of helicopters flew to the airstrips here like swarms of insects against the gray skies to pick up men from the 101st Airborne Division and take them to Khesanh. A sign outside the division's helicopter office here says:

"Death is our business and business has been good."

The belief that this is the

last big operation for Americans arises from a decision to keep United States troops out of a primary ground combat role after midsummer. The Americans here have played essentially a support role. If that is Vietnamization, a word that means different things to different people here, then Americans may be doing more of it, on a smaller scale, in the future.

But so far the South Vietnamese command at Dongha north of here is not talking, and American briefing officers here say they cannot speak for the South Vietnamese.

Here at the scene of the operation spokesmen will not say for what ultimate purpose all the giant cargo aircraft have been flying to this base 24 hours a day from points all over South Vietnam, Taiwan and the Philippines, why bare-backed Army engineers wearing hippie beads and peace symbols worked 12 hours a day making an old French route to Laos passable again, why the commanding general of the First Brigade of the Fifth Infantry Division (Mechanized) moved his command post from here to Langvei in a bamboo field about five miles from where the road crosses into Laos.

Sgt. Robert Minning of 133-43 Roosevelt Avenue Flushing, Queens, looking over a bombed-out bridge along the road west toward what he could see of Laos, said the other day, "they wouldn't tell us where we were going, or what we were going to do when we left last week. We moved out to the docks from Chulai, where we have been the last few months, and got on an L.S.T. The captain of the boat asked our C.O., 'where are we taking you?' and he just said, 'I don't know, you're taking us, that's all.'"

Since the North Vietnamese soldiers whom American intelligence sources thought were hiding in the thick cover of the mountains have not been seen

and have not resisted the sweep west, the Americans are relaxed and go about more or less routine tasks. They are clearing the 20-foot-high grass and bamboo from the new base area at Langvei.

Some officers, especially those in the infantry brigade staff who have remained in the red mud of this sprawling base at Quangtri, are surprised and a little disconcerted about the pace of the operation. The feeling here is that the North Vietnamese may wait until after their enemies have crossed into Laos, deep into the network of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, before they attack, if they intend to attack at all.

From Khesanh west, the weather at this time of year is cool but dry, and the sun shines through the scattered clouds almost every day.

Route 9 is a rutted, twisting, dusty trail that dodges bomb craters left by American air strikes around Khesanh in 1968. The forward American command post is closer to the border along the road at Langvei—military authorities forbid divulging its exact location—and from there west, infantry positions and artillery sites cover the border area where the South Vietnamese are expected to move across.

Convoys of trucks and artillery were continuing to wind their way up Route 9 to the Khesanh plateau and as long as the road remains open it should be possible to keep the American troops supplied.

But there have been some shellings along the road and it is the possibility of having to depend entirely on supply by air in uncertain weather that worries some American officers here.

An officer driving back from the border said the other day, "we've been surprised at how light the action has been. We know there are more of them out there."