

Down a Forbidden Trail



U.S. troops in an armored personnel carrier ignored a sign warning U.S. personnel not to go further as they drove down a trail toward

the Laos border yesterday. The sign was posted west of Lang Vei, a former Green Beret camp overrun by the Reds in 1968.

UPI Telephotos

An American at the Laos Border--Invasion Scene

By Jack Foisie
Times-Post Service

Inside Laos, with South Vietnamese troops.

An initial ground force of South Vietnamese — a column of 52 armored personnel carriers — passed the military checkpoint marking the Laotian border at 7 a.m. yesterday as airborne infantry moved across in helicopters.

Later in the day a second column of about ten vehicles crossed into Laos. With them on foot went six newsmen, including this reporter, as American troops fought to secure the high ground on South Vietnam's side of the border.

We managed to evade the military police who were there to carry out a South Vietnamese government order that no newsmen be permitted in the initial phases of the invasion.

Our hike into Laos was obscured by dust clouds raised by big tracked vehicles. Bulldozers had moved out at dawn to clear the road.

CAMOUFLAGE

The tankers, who met no resistance on the road, were cheerful. Their vehicles were camouflaged with green foliage that included, in contrast, large orange panels to identify them to aircraft. The greenery included wild coffee bushes, and when a tanker needed a pickup he plucked the green coffee beans and chewed them.

But while the scene on Route Nine was relaxed, we were within sight and sound of sharp fighting in the hills flanking the column. Much of it involved American troops just inside South Vietnam, with resulting American casualties.

The American units were trying to gain control of the high ground overlooking the old French colonial highway, unused in the border area since 1962.

FIGHTING

One American unit was probing a hill close to the border checkpoint and believed to be an enemy observation post. The unit ran into trouble and for the next hour American spotter planes, helicopters and jets pounded the enemy hill with all their de-

structive power, including napalm and big bombs.

American medical evacuation choppers went to the hill to bring out 16 wounded and one dead American.

This was one of the numerous clashes American troops had with the enemy on the Vietnamese side of the border. The enemy also reacted to the invasion by ambushing one American convoy carrying fuel to Khe Sanh, the old Marine fortress and now the forward supply point for both the Americans and the South Vietnamese.

Meanwhile, other American helicopters flew South Vietnamese troops into Laos up to a reported distance of seven miles. They wanted to take the high ground on the Laos side of the border.

First returning American pilots reported they had met heavy anti-aircraft fire during the landings.

CROSSING

The American command's strict order that no American ground troops cross into Laos appeared to have been ob-

served, but one possible violation took place at the Route 9 checkpoint, where Lieutenant Colonel Bill Aikan, senior adviser to the advance South Vietnamese command, walked past the sign saying:

"No American personnel past this point."

He was not seen to return during the many hours that newsmen remained in the area.

Big American cargo copters flew numerous missions to supply South Vietnamese forces in Laos. Some of the flights were to the high escarpment close to the border on the Laos side. This ridge had been used by North Vietnamese to shell Khe Sanh during the 77-day siege three years ago. The allied command had taken pains to take the ridge to protect the invading force.

Lieutenant General Hoan Xuan Lam, who commands the South Vietnamese phase of the operation, visited the border at mid-morning and expressed pleasure at the progress.