

Along the Road to Laos: Noise, Dust, Confusion

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BANHOUEKATANG, South Vietnam, Feb. 8—The artillery fired over this little border crossing into Laos all night, and the young South Vietnamese Rangers who climbed aboard their boxy armored personnel carriers to invade Laos this morning said they had not been able to sleep well.

The American armored squad whose Sheridan tanks and armored carriers watched the road to Laos before the South Vietnamese moved across had the same complaint—they had been ordered up an hour earlier than usual, at 4:30 A.M., to move their "tracks" so the Vietnamese could get by.

Almost exactly at 7 A.M., as the dawn was breaking behind the sharp, brush-covered hills on either side of the road here, the first South Vietnamese A.P.C.'s clanked and rumbled past the American tanks, churned through the dust over the culvert at the bottom of a dry creek, and disappeared over the far rise past the red and white border-sign reading: "Warning—No U. S. Personnel Beyond This Point."

The young American tankmen, scruffy and cynical after a week in the field without bath or clean clothes, stood on their machines with their hands in their greasy fatigue pockets and watched the South Vietnamese roll by toward the Laotian border about 200 yards away.

Invasion an Anticlimax

For them, the long-awaited invasion of Laos was an anticlimax. South Vietnamese military police stood like traffic cops to stop anyone from trying to walk with the advancing A.P.C.'s up to the border, and the only excitement of the day had come just after midnight, when the marijuana smokers in one of the American A.P.C.'s set off a flare and began firing their .50- .30-caliber machine guns into the brush around the camp.

"I sort of wish someone would shoot at us a little," said Sgt. Gary Lawson, the tank commander of one of the Sheridans. "At least it would give us something to do."

A South Vietnamese Ranger Sargent, Ngo Van Thi, waiting for his unit to move ahead, pulled his blanket tighter against the chill morning air and sounded just as unaffected by his impending move into a new battlefield.

"I've already fought in Cambodia," and ticked off the battles there—Svayrieng, Mimot, Kompong Cham—"and now I'm going into Laos. It is not so special, but I think it will be harder than Cambodia."

Rangers Move In

After the first 20 South Vietnamese tracks went by, each with about a dozen soldiers crouching among the wilting brush camouflage, the Vietnamese Army Rangers advanced into Laos with several bulldozers and two

dilapidated trucks loaded with tools, lumber and several folding beachchairs hung from the tailgates.

Two jeeps filled with American officers, advisers to the South Vietnamese Rangers and armor units, also drove slowly and a little self-consciously along with the steadily advancing line of A.P.C.'s.

At the red and white sign, they stepped from the jeep, handed their maps and cases over to their Vietnamese counterparts, and watched their pupils disappear over the crest of the hill towards Laos.

By 11 A.M., 52 South Vietnamese armored personnel carriers had moved into Laos, while the warming skies began to buzz with United States helicopters crisscrossing high overhead carrying South Vietnamese troops and supplies into Laos.

Smaller American light observation helicopters and the sleek shark-nosed Cobra attack helicopters skimmed by at treetop level hunting for enemy troops that might be waiting in ambush along the dusty road.

Smaller Trickles to a Halt

By noon, the slow stream across the border had stopped. The American tank crews crept under outstretched tarpaulins or into the shade of their machines to catch up on sleep. Two young tankmen returned to their game of trying to remember the names of all the top recording groups they had heard.

While the border seemed almost placid, the 16 mile stretch west from here to Khesanh was busy with the noise and smells of overcrowded roads, overheated engines and tired and confused men.

An advancing South Vietnamese ration convoy, each of its new American trucks one-third filled, refused to give way to the battered trucks and A.P.C.'s of the withdrawing Americans and tempers flared in two languages. The thick red dust of the road now widened to more than twice its original single-lane width, choked the men along the roadside and sometimes hid oncoming traffic from view until the last second. Helicopters landed in random clearings and kicked off supplies for other units, and the ensuing arguments could be heard crowding the airwaves on the American air controller's radio.

The heavy traffic on Route 9, which was first built by the French to service their coffee plantations in these hills, has pounded deep ruts and steep shoulders into the road, and several large trucks overturned into the dry creekbeds at the foot of each culvert crossing.

At several large bumps in the road, dozens of live artillery rounds lay on the side of the road where they had been jolted from the beds of passing trucks.

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