

SOUTH VIETNAMESE REACH FOE'S SUPPLY LINE IN LAOS; 2 U.S. COPTERS SHOT DOWN



United Press International

South Vietnamese at Langvei shortly before entering Laos

FEB 9 1971

3,000 TROOPS LAND

Enemy's Resistance to Initial Incursion Is Said to Be Light

By CRAIG R. WHITNEY

Special to The New York Times

KHESANH, South Vietnam, Feb. 8 — South Vietnamese troops moved into some areas of the enemy's supply-route network in southern Laos today hours after having swept across the border in armored columns and American-piloted helicopters.

One regiment of the South Vietnamese First Infantry Division, numbering 3,000 soldiers, landed amid a trail complex 20 miles south of the key enemy supply center of Tchepone, according to Lieut. Col. Thuat Xang, a battalion commander interviewed here.

Reports from the field, where newsmen were not officially permitted, said that two American helicopters had been shot down with the loss of at least two crewmen, who were listed as missing. Four other helicopters were reported hit by enemy fire and possibly downed.

Later, the United States command announced in Saigon that one American had been killed and eight wounded when a United States convoy on the South Vietnamese side of the border near Khesanh ran into an ambush.

Fire Base Set Up

Initial enemy resistance in Laos was termed light as South Vietnamese ground troops advanced across the border from this northwestern corner of South Vietnam. [They set up a fire base 10 miles inside Laos on Route 9, one-third of the way to Tchepone, The Associated Press reported].

Most of the troops were believed to have entered Laos along Route 9, which United States forces cleared to the border and improved after 20,000 South Vietnamese and 9,000 Americans began a joint operation in northern South Vietnam Jan. 30. But how many South Vietnamese troops actually entered Laos was not disclosed.

The incursion into Laos, which had been expected almost from the time that reports began circulating about the allied operations in northern South Vietnam, was announced this morning by President Nguyen Van Thieu.

Pre-Incursion Landing

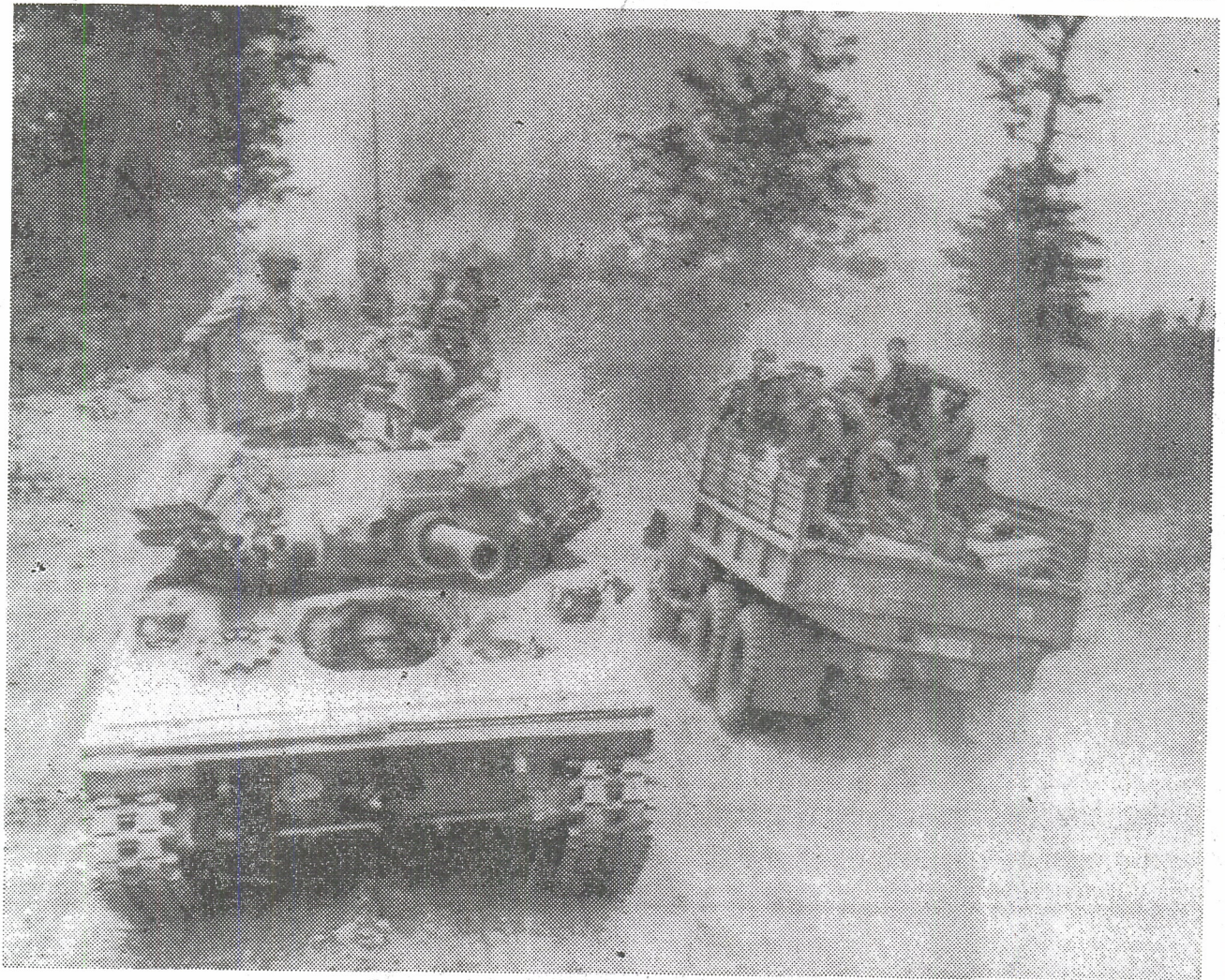
He declared in a statement that the operation was "a necessary act of legitimate self-defense" and he pledged it would be "limited in time as well as in space."

The President asserted that South Vietnam harbored no territorial ambitions and would withdraw all its troops from Laos "when the limited operation ends." Neither he nor Government spokesmen suggested today how long this might be.

According to South Vietnamese sources, an initial airborne crossing was made by a battalion of Vietnamese Rangers, about 500 men, sent in Sunday afternoon to make the landing site secure. FEB 7

The Route 9 land crossing, 16 miles south of the demilitarized zone, which straddles the line dividing North Vietnam from South Vietnam, took place shortly after 7 A.M. in armored personnel carriers. By 11 A.M.,

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The New York Times/Nancy Moran

IN OPPOSITE DIRECTIONS: South Vietnamese soldiers on way to Laos pass Khesanh-bound U.S. tank near the border

Saigon's Troops Reach Foe's Supply Line in Laos

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52 carriers had crossed the border.

The helicopters began to lift off at 10 A.M. from several newly cleared pick-up points, along the road between Khesanh, high in the mountains, and an American command post at Langvei, about six miles from the Laotian border.

The cloud-swept skies over Khesanh, which has been the starting point for the ground and air incursion, were filled throughout the day with hundreds of American helicopters carrying troops, artillery pieces and supplies, and firing at North Vietnamese across the border.

United States Army helicopter gunships clustered around the troop-carrying helicopters at one of the main pick-up zones here beneath a forest of radio antennas belonging to the forward South Vietnamese command post.

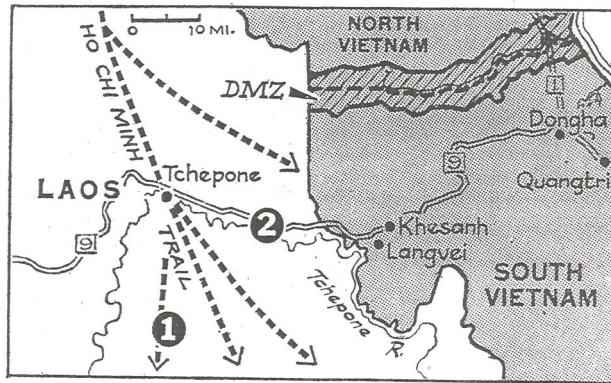
American helicopter crewmen said as they were loading South Vietnamese troops that they had orders not to debark with them in Laos.

No Americans were seen crossing the Tchepone River where the South Vietnamese armored personnel carriers were heading.

U. S. Gives No Details

Because the actual sweep into Laos is said to be a completely Vietnamese operation, although fully supported by the Americans, United States military officers gave no details on it today in Quangtri. But neither did the South Vietnamese.

A South Vietnamese command spokesman said at the daily war briefing in Saigon this afternoon that all news-men would be barred from witnessing the operation in Laos



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One Saigon force was airlifted to trail area south of Tchepone (1). Another set up fire base east of it (2).

until security could be assured.

Few details of the operation were disclosed by the spokesman. He declined to say how many of the 20,000 South Vietnamese troops transported to the northwest corner of the country last week had actually moved into Laos. He did, however, indicate some would be left behind, at least temporarily, in Khesanh and Langvei.

Nor would the spokesman say how far into Laos the troops had penetrated or at how many points Saigon's forces had crossed the border. Asked whether the South Vietnamese had obtained the approval of Prince Souvanna Phouma, the Laotian Premier, for the incursions, the chief Government spokesman, Nguyen Ngoc Huyen, said, "I think we do have agreement on what we are doing." But he refused to amplify.

Language Difficulties

The military spokesman said that he was not aware of any coordination between South Vietnamese and Laotian Government forces.

At times, because of language difficulties, the United States pilots had trouble getting the soldiers to board the helicopters, six or seven at a time, but in the end they succeeded.

An Americanergeant helping with the ferrying procedure said, "Do they want to go? Hell no?"

The South Vietnamese soldiers said they were carrying enough food on their backs to last a week. But some of them

War Casualties

WASHINGTON, Feb. 8 (UPI) —The Defense Department today listed the names of the following Army men from the New York area as having been killed in the war in Indochina.

JACKSON, Keith M., Chief Warrant Officer, Cresskill, N. J.
MILLER, Thomas C., Pfc., Pennsauken, N. J.
VOLLHARDT, Philipp R., First Lieut., West Redding, Conn.
WARREN, Stephen E., Specialist 4, Rochester.

said they were told they would remain in Laos three to six months.

The American door gunner on one of the helicopters here described the terrain of the first landing zone, only a mile across the border a top a mountain that could be seen as the troops embarked. "It's flat on one side, and there are big cliffs on the other side," he said, adding that the cliffs face the South Vietnamese side of the border and command the river valley where the road, the old colonial Route 9, crosses the frontier.

The new red-earth airstrip at Khesanh has not been used yet to land cargo aircraft as planned, but was filled with hundreds of helicopters this morning, refueling here for troop pick-ups and supply missions. Scores of other helicopters swarmed over the area.

Periodically, pilots dashed hundreds of yards down the unway to the idle aircraft as the signal was given for

new drops into Laos. Green smoke flares marked landing points for cargo loads from huge helicopters, which stirred up tornados of red dust, grass, stray bits of paper and even small stones as they hovered above the ground.

Heavy Enemy Fire Reported

KESANH, Feb. 8 (UPI) — "We took so much fire I couldn't believe it," a helicopter pilot who was shot down during today's South Vietnamese incursion into Laos said on his return here. "There were a lot of Communists all over the place."

The pilot was Capt. Jasper Sander, 31 years old, of Shrewsbury, Mass.

The size of the South Vietnamese force that entered Laos was put at 5,000 men. More than 200 United States fighter-bombers and helicopter gunships were said to have flown tactical support missions for this force.

The commander of South Vietnam's armored units, Col. Dui le Duong, said here that the principal objective of the incursion was Tchepone, a major staging area and junction of the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Laotians Report Gains

VIENTIANE, Laos, Feb. 8 (Agence France-Presse) — Government forces today were reported to have recaptured some positions they had lost in northern Laos above the royal capital, Luang Prabang. But a spokesman, Gen. Thongpanh Konksy, said enemy pressure continued.

Gen. Tiao Sayavong, brother of King Savang Vatthana and military commander for northern Laos, said that advances by Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese troops had been halted by Government action and by a lack of supplies. Counterattacks by Laotian Government forces in the last three days were said to have included air support by small T-28 fighters and DC-4's armed with machine guns.

In the Plaine des Jarres area, North Vietnamese were said to be infiltrating toward the Special Forces bases of Sam Thong and Long Tieng, and an attack on them appeared near.