

Big Gap at the Briefings on Laos

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QUANGTRI, South Vietnam, Feb. 12—The gap between what is visible in the forward areas and what United States and South Vietnamese military officials say here and in Saigon about the incursion into Laos has been wide since the American push toward the Laotian border began in secrecy Jan. 30.

The impression given by the reluctance of the American and Vietnamese commands to release comprehensive information is that they prefer to reduce the operation's importance.

News Analysis

"I have nothing to report on American activities today," the officer who gives the nightly briefing on United States support of the South Vietnamese sweep said Wednesday at the combat base here. "Everything was quiet today."

That day American helicopter pilots who had been flying over Laos from the Khesanh Plateau, 30 miles west of here, to provide air cover for South Vietnamese were coming back breathless, with bullet holes in their craft. One said: "Every time we've gone out, we've had our aircraft shot to hell. We told the Vietnamese to stay out of there."

Not until this morning did the United States command in Saigon confirm what American pilots were saying in Khesanh Wednesday upon announcing that four helicopters had been shot down in Laos that day and that three crewmen had been wounded.

Not until this afternoon did the command say that eight Americans had been killed and six wounded in seven copters shot down in Laos since the incursion began Monday. Two other men are missing.

Even after the news blackout on the entire operation was lifted by the military authorities on Feb. 4, the gap continued because the Americans do not comment on Vietnamese operations—they say, "It's a Vietnamese show"—and the Vietnamese did not break their silence here until today. They still do not say how long they intend to stay in Laos, where they are trying to go or where they are now.

The paucity of information

Copters Have Busy Day but the Official Word Is 'Quiet'

ostensibly stems from a desire to protect the advancing troops.

The extent of American activities in support of the South Vietnamese in Laos is obscure and little effort is being made to clarify the situation, which many in the United States regard as a widening of American involvement. The American military authorities here have refused to give any information on how many American helicopters are flying over Laos or how far in they have gone. That information can be released only by the United States command in Saigon, they say.

Today, after several days of inquiries, the command announced that American pilots took off on about 500 helicopter flights—troop lifts, strafing missions and supply runs—over Laos yesterday but it did not say how many had been flown since Monday or how many bombing missions had been carried out by fighter-bombers and B-52's over Laos in the current operation.

Only when reporters in Saigon asked why an unusually large number of medical-evacuation helicopters flew last Saturday did the command report that an unidentified United States plane had dropped anti-personnel bombs on a South Vietnamese unit near Khesanh, killing six South Vietnamese soldiers and wounding 51.

Vietnamese spokesmen, who did not report the incident at all, privately expressed concern that it might irritate United States-South Vietnamese relations.

In discussing the drive into Laos, the South Vietnamese, who say they have not advanced farther than 13 miles from the border, give the appearance of having embarked on a limited and rather routine operation close to the border. When rumors have circulated that they have swept through and captured the remains of the key junction town of Tchepone, the Vietnamese command in Saigon has denied them; it did so again today.

The only way to find out what the troops are doing is to go where the action is, but reporters are not permitted to cross the border in the United States helicopters that have been flying South Vietnamese troops and supplies to the battleground in nominally neutral Laos.

The command here cites Defense Department regulations that bar military aircraft from carrying civilians across international boundaries or competing with commercial airlines as the reasons why the reporters cannot go although they did in Cambodia last spring, when American troops were fighting there.

Diplomatic niceties do not trouble the South Vietnamese Air Force, which has been flying correspondents to Laos. Two of their craft got lost Wednesday in mountains dotted with North Vietnamese anti-aircraft sites and were shot down in flames, and four photographers are missing.

An indication of the extent of the American support role is that for every Vietnamese general in the forward command post on the remains of a French tea plantation west of Khesanh there appears to be an American one, monitoring hourly developments on the westward thrust but declining to assume responsibility for them or to divulge information about them.

Perhaps that conforms to a pattern, for American and South Vietnamese operations in Laos have been cloaked in secrecy for most of the last nine years. The present one, though announced in Saigon by President Nguyen Van Thieu on Monday, remains obscure.

A visitor who landed seven miles inside Laos on a Vietnamese helicopter Wednesday was told by the flabbergasted South Vietnamese colonel commanding a small tank base on the dusty road toward Tchepone: "I can't tell you where you are." Pressed, he covered his field map and said, "Well, you're in Mr. Phouma's country," referring to Prince Souvanna Phouma, Premier of Laos.