

FOE'S TROOP FLOW IS REPORTED CUT BY DRIVE IN LAOS

Saigon Says All but Two of
Key Ho Chi Minh Trail
Sections Are Closed

BOMBER RAIDS CONTINUE

Vietnamese Assert Sweep
Is Slowed by Discovery of
Enemy Supply Caches

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Feb. 15 — Military officials asserted today that the allied sweep westward into the Laotian mountains, where thousands of South Vietnamese troops are trying to block the Ho Chi Minh Trail network, had already succeeded in cutting off the flow of enemy supplies and troops into the northernmost province of South Vietnam.

The officials also said that the South Vietnamese advance had denied to the enemy all but two of the most important southbound sections of the trail, diminishing although not halting the movement of North Vietnamese traffic farther south.

The South Vietnamese commander of the operation, Lieut. Gen. Hoang Xuan Lam, told newsmen at a forward command post near Khesanh that his troops had cut the main part of the trail. "We hold the part they need to resupply their troops to the south," he said.

The Americans have maintained since they started the operation Jan. 30 with a push as far as the western border of South Vietnam that their objective was to counter an enemy build-up in the northernmost military region of South Vietnam.

Half Mile Gain in a Day

The South Vietnamese were secretive about their operation beyond the border until recently. Today, their military spokesman here said that they had advanced about a half a mile westward along the trace of the old east-west Route 9 from where they were yesterday, with their deepest point of penetration now about 15 miles inside Laos.

From 11,000 to 12,000 South Vietnamese troops are said to be in Laos.

Although their advance appeared to be headed for strategic road junctions at the town of Tchepone, General Lam told reporters, "We don't need Tchepone, only the principal trail, which we now occupy."

However, military sources here said that the South Vietnamese already were about 12 miles east of Tchepone and that some small reconnaissance units might be close to the abandoned town.

Slow, Cautious Advance

Meanwhile, the intensive bombing of the trail north and south of the South Vietnamese ground operation in Laos continues with extensive daily strikes by B-52's and smaller planes against North Vietnamese supply and infiltration routes.

The South Vietnamese are said to be advancing along a broad front extending from 12 to 25 miles north and south of Route 9 as it follows the Tchepone River into Laos.

Their advance has been a slow, cautious one, with little progress over the last four days. But besides caution, the reason for the slowness, their spokesman here said today, is "the discovery of so many supply caches we have to have time to search."

The latest discovery, the spokesman said, is an abandoned enemy training center containing 400 small buildings, seven Russian-made trucks in

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good condition, and 5,500 gallons of gasoline.

The spokesman said about 30 enemy tanks have been destroyed so far in the operation.

Other caches — including one displayed to newsmen last Saturday under a camouflaged, mile-long section of the trail—have contained supplies of ammunition. The section showed signs that the enemy had been there recently.

Although the South Vietnamese say they have killed a total of 449 enemy soldiers since they went into Laos Feb. 8, their advance into a supply network that the North Vietnamese have held tenaciously

through years of the most intensive bombing in history has been met with little resistance.

Military officials here say that enemy units in the area have not exceeded company size. But reinforcements of regimental size—2,000 soldiers—are believed to be in the Bandong area south of Route 9 on the Tchepone River between the border and Tchepone.

Military sources say, however, that the North Vietnamese have not tried to get behind the South Vietnamese forces by infiltrating through the demilitarized zone that straddles the border between North and South Vietnam.

Despite the lack of reinforcements, enemy troops have been active in the rolling, empty hill

country and mountains around the main helicopter base that supports the operation from Khesanh and along the twisting course followed by Route 9 from the Quangtri and Dongha combat bases through Khesanh and toward the west. They have staged a number of ambushes and artillery and rocket attacks in the last two weeks.

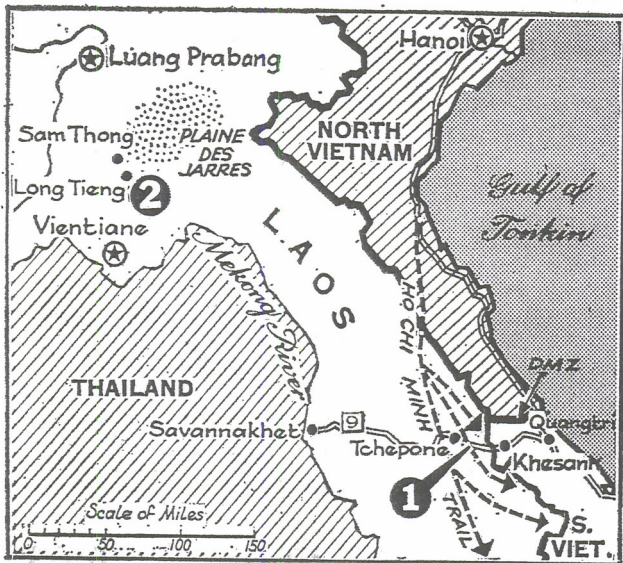
The United States command here reported that American forces killed eight enemy soldiers Sunday evening 10 miles north-northwest of Khesanh.

At Khesanh, engineers have finished repairing an aluminum-plank runway and a giant C-130 cargo plane landed with fuel and electronic gear. Regular C-130 flights would significantly improve the supply situation there.

South Vietnamese commanders at Khesanh say they are concerned about the ability to keep their forces supplied in the operation. With a week of cloudy, rainy weather and poor visibility forecast for the Khesanh - Dongha - Quangtri re-

gion, helicopter flights through the mountain passes to Khesanh may become impossible, and in rain Route 9 quickly mires truck convoys.

With the 24,000 South Vietnamese and 9,000 American troops strung out over about 75 miles of road between Quangtri and the deepest South Vietnamese positions inside Laos, the supply problems could quickly become critical if the flow is interrupted.



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South Vietnamese said they had cut main part of foe's supply trails in Laos (1). In the north, U.S.-backed base at Long Tieng (2) was resupplied and reinforced.