

Buildup in Laos

'Dien Bien Phu' Battle Predicted

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Along Laotian Border

An elite North Vietnamese division that spearheaded the conquest of Dien Bien Phu in 1954 is counter-attacking sharply against South Vietnamese Rangers blocking a main road of the Ho Chi Minh trail system, a Ranger commander said yesterday.

"This will be a bigger battle than Dien Bien Phu," Colonel Nguyen Van Hiep, 39, commander of South Vietnam's First Ranger Group, predicted.

Hiep, who commands three Ranger battalions operating inside Laos, fought alongside the French at Dien Bien Phu but was wounded and evacuated before the fortress fell. "This battle will end differently from Dien Bien Phu," Hiep added. "We have the air, artillery and all other support that the French never had there."

The Colonel's comments reflected the outspoken belief of other high South Vietnamese officers that they are heading into the decisive battle of the second Indochina war that began in the early 1960s.

ENEMY

South Vietnamese intelligence officers predict that the three crack North Vietnamese divisions — the 304th, 308th and 320th — totaling more than 40,000 men, will be thrown into battle within the next month to keep the Ho trail from being cut during its peak period for supplying Communist troops in South Vietnam and Cambodia.

The expected enemy blow could fall either against the American-supplied South Vietnamese forces 13 miles inside Laos or against the American troops protecting the South Vietnamese rear in South Vietnam, the intelligence officers said.

Colonel Hiep's three Ranger battalions hold the northernmost flank of the South Vietnamese invasion force, ten miles north of the east-west road called Highway 9, and they have been engaged in heavy fighting for the past week. Their chief opponent, Hiep said, was the 88th Regiment of the 308th Division, which is already in the area. The 308 was the key Communist Division in the storming of Dien Bien Phu, and the

88th was and is its crack regiment.

MOUNTAIN

Hiep spoke at his headquarters here on a 3000-foot mountain-top only a mile inside South Vietnam from the Laotian border. Three nights earlier, a company of the 88th Regiment drove a Ranger platoon from a nearby hilltop in a nightlong battle. Four of the 30 Rangers were killed, and the rest withdrew, carrying out five wounded, after fighting with knives and grenades when their ammunition gave out, U. S. advisers said. But the hilltop was reoccupied the next day.

Hiep said one of his Battalions is sitting astride a two-lane dirt road 6 miles inside Laos which was recently built by the North Vietnamese after U. S. bombing locked a major artery of the blocked a major artery of the Ho trail farther west. He said his troops also had destroyed a large cache of Chinese-manufactured tear gas, five 152-mm artillery pieces and more than 300 tons of small arms and artillery ammunition.

"We are in position now so that the Communists will have to come to us," Hiep said. "They have more artillery now, more of everything than they had at Dien Bien Phu. But we have American air power and artillery and supplies. This battle will be bigger than Dien Bien Phu, but I think we will win."

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