

At Border Crossing Into Laos, the Litter of Troops and History

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On ROUTE 9, near the Laotian border, Feb. 15—Now there is only the garbage of war. Empty C-ration cans of fruit cocktail and turkey loaf, an empty Pall Mall cigarette pack, a single khaki sock and two mounds of sand bags are strewn about at the border crossing into Laos on Route 9.

A week ago it was here that thousands of South Vietnamese troops, supported by American planes and artillery, marched into Laos, leaving the litter behind.

It hardly looks like a place where the history of Indochina has been dramatically changed.

No man stands guard. Stretched across the road are two long bamboo poles tied together with string to show where Laos begins and American soldiers must not go.

The sign, "Warning! No U.S. Personnel Beyond This Point" has dozens of names scrawled on it. On the back, facing Laos, is a faintly scrawled message to the North Vietnamese Army: "Warning! No N.V.A. Beyond This Point."

No American Vehicles

There are no American trucks in this section of Route 9. A long, narrow roller coaster of a road, whose rising dust is white, then orange, sometimes dark brown, it cuts through elephant grass, bamboo trees and nine-foot stalks topped by ostrichlike plumes and is just wide enough for one truck to squeeze by another.

No supplies are moving into Laos on the road, for the South Vietnamese troops are being supplied by air. It is a lonely

road and a bad one to walk on. There are snipers, there are North Vietnamese rockets coming in from positions in Laos as well as here in Vietnam. There is a silence even at noon that makes men with M-16 rifles uneasy.

The American soldiers are 300 yards from the border on a jump of a hill where seven tanks and armored personnel carriers form the defense perimeter of a miniature fire base. The men are soldiers from the American Division and from the First Brigade of the Fifth Infantry Division (Mechanized).

"Christ, we're Defenseless here!" said Pvt. George Miller, a 22-year-old Newark man. "They could fire pot shots at us all day and all night long if they wanted to."

The Americans' job is to secure the road, search the area and stay alive.

Tribal Competitiveness

On the unnamed hill are a mixture of tankers—the men who drive the machines—the grunts or infantryman, and the mortar squads. There is friendly friction, a tribal competitiveness, that provides their only entertainment.

Many of the Americans here, their faces sore from the dust and grime, their bodies covered with the small open boils that infest unwashed Westerners fighting in Vietnam, wish they could have gone into Laos.

"I'd love to go into Laos—if we did, we'd get everything organized right, see," Specialist 4 Anthony Hockman of Battletown, Ky., said.

Few of the men here think the South Vietnamese can seal off the Ho Chi Minh Trail. There is still a deep suspicion that they will not do as well as Americans would; it is a con-

viction the G.I.'s like to voice. "I saw them fight in Kontum—they got into contact and they ran out, they bugged out, and left two wounded behind," said Specialist 4 Harold Dingus of South Shore, Ky.

Some Voice Their Doubts

There are some men who feel that it is not doing any good to be here, who say they are outnumbered by the North Vietnamese in the surrounding highlands. "You might say it's a case of the unwilling helping the unwilling to kill the unwanted," Sgt. Kirk Coles said.

Less than a mile down from the border are South Vietnamese troops from the 11th Airborne Battalion. The paratroopers, who often trade their packages of precooked rice for C-rations, are not so sure that the Ho Chi Minh Trail can ever be cut.

Cpl. Le Ngu said in Vietnamese: "Do you think the N.V.A. are all fools? I can tell you the Ho Chi Minh Trail is very complicated—you attack here, you attack there, but they will get through in other places." "When do we have peace, huh? A Vietnamese paratrooper asked as he ate his lunch of rice and duck with chopsticks made of bamboo.

'Write a Letter to Thier'

Another soldier snorted. "Write a letter to Mr. Thien and ask him," he said, referring to Nguyen Van Thien, President of South Vietnam.

Nguyen Van Thien, President of South Vietnam, Corporal Ngu shook his head, shoved more rice into his mouth and replied: "Goddamn it, Thien never knows, Nixon never knows." Yesterday the South Vietnamese here suffered when two mortar

rounds hit their camp, where there are nearly 150 men. The Americans, who are closer to the border, were hit by a North Vietnamese rocket today. Every man jammed on his steel helmet.

Sitting on the sandbags around one of the two 81-mm. mortars, Pvt. Richard Ferguson of Columbus, Ohio, told why he did not get married last year before he was drafted and sent to Vietnam.

"You read about all these guys getting shot up," he said. "I thought it was as bad as what it's getting to be." That struck half a dozen men as very witty.

'They Are Hard to Kill'

None of the G.I.'s here look upon the North Vietnamese forces as being on their last legs or as a ragtag army that has nothing to fight with and lacks the spirit to win.

"They are hard to kill—I once put six bullets in a gook and still he don't die," Specialist 4 Manuel Navarro of San Antonio, Tex., said. "He looked about 17."

At a few minutes before 2 P.M., an infantry platoon "got in real trouble," as one G.I. put it. The radio operation of the platoon, which believed it was surrounded, had the voice of a man trying hard to sound steady.

"Most of us had to retreat," he said, "I'll give you further word when I figure out what's going on around here."

No one seemed sleepy then the small talk about favorite movies and much-loved cars, more rice into his mouth and about girls with long, blond hair and perfect legs, stopped. News on the Radio Half a dozen men clustered around the field radio listening to the pilot of a gunship find a target, to the pilot of a

helicopter removing wounded men through the triple canopy of jungle.

An hour later the site where the platoon had taken fire was mashed by 8-inch howitzers and burned by white phosphorus and blasted by 6,000 bullets a minute from the air. "Goddamn good show, and probably all for nothing, too," a soldier said. "The dinks have gone underground or scattered." Specialist 4 Harry Crane of Steubenville, Ohio, began to cook dinner, as he does every night, in two steel helmets over an open fire.

"I use the same two pots for cooking every night," he said. "I just mix together a lot of C's and some rice and noodles for the Vietnamese trade us for cigarettes. You have to put in lots of hot sauce and garlic salt."