

Saigon's Rangers Driven From an Outpost in Laos

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PHULOC COMMAND POST, South Vietnam, Feb. 21 — A battalion of South Vietnamese rangers was driven from a Laotian mountaintop six miles northwest of here last night after North Vietnamese soldiers overran their position.

The loss followed the first major enemy attack reported against the Vietnamese thrust at the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which began Feb. 8.

United States military advisers at this border post 11 miles south of the demilitarized zone said that helicopters could not bring supplies or reinforcements to the rangers yesterday because of heavy anti-aircraft fire. Some managed to reach the site today after air strikes were called in.

Some of the air strikes were directed from the ground in Laos by the crew chief of a downed medical evacuation helicopter, Specialist 4 Dennis J. Fuji.

The advisers said that Specialist Fuji was wounded when his helicopter was shot down Thursday. After unsuccessful attempts to rescue him, he stayed with the South Vietnamese to treat their wounded and put them on helicopters.

According to the advisers, helicopters took 200 men from the overrun group, the 39th Rangers Battalion, to the more secure position of the 21st Ranger Battalion on high ground about a mile to the west. Of the 200 men, 50 were reported to have been seriously wounded. By midday about 70 wounded men from the battalion had been flown out of Laos to the hill called Phuloc.

The rangers, who are regarded as one of the best fighting units the South Vietnamese have, were dropped by helicopters on Feb. 8 onto the

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mountains about nine miles north of Route 9, the East-West axis of the South Vietnamese sweep into Laos to cut enemy supply lines.

Estimate of Losses

"They took heavy casualties," an American advisor said. "But they tied down a North Vietnamese regiment — that's what they were there for."

The South Vietnamese military spokesman at Quangtri, the rear base for the operation, said that 23 rangers had been killed and 40 wounded in the attack, but that 639 enemy soldiers had been killed.

Before the attack grew to overwhelming proportions during the night, Col. Nguyen Van Hiep had reported that heavy casualties were being inflicted on the enemy. But the helicopters could not get through to the rangers and by morning the battalion had abandoned its position and taken heavy losses.

Clasping his forehead wearily in his palms, Colonel Hiep bent over his maps in the afternoon and pointed at the abandoned position, saying: "One hundred and eight men were there last night. Today I do not know."

There are no roads to this base which is surrounded by enemy positions, and wounded men from the overrun battalion rushed to board each incoming evacuation helicopter. Others, who were weary of battle but did not appear to be wounded, also got aboard.

United States military sources have reported evidence that parts of four North Vietnamese regiments are in the area of the sweep, and now say that two more might be on their way—one from the north, where the rangers have been attacked, and one from the south.

Helicopters Crucial

The South Vietnamese are depending entirely on helicopters for supplies and food, in addition to reinforcements, and are not using Route 9 although it has been cleared.

Brig. Gen. Pham Van Phu, the first commander of South Vietnam's First Infantry Division, said at Khesanh that this was because "we don't have enough troops to make the route secure and occupy" 15 to 20 miles of the Ho Chi Minh Trail at the same time.

About 16,000 South Vietnamese soldiers, protected from the rear and in the air by 9,000 Americans, have gone across the broad front into Laos. The

farthest point of advance has been put at 20 miles.

South of Route 9

Infantry troops occupy parts of the area stretching to about 11 miles south of Route 9.

All South Vietnamese forces in Laos depend on more than 1,000 daily American helicopter flights for air cover and supplies. Enemy anti-aircraft fire has brought down 13 craft in Laos by the official United States count, but many more have been severely damaged or have crash-landed.

South Vietnamese airborne units in Laos were also reportedly having difficulties because heavy anti-aircraft fire had cut them off from lines of support. But an airborne commander said: "We took out the anti-aircraft fire that was giving us trouble. There is light contact but this is okay now."

The Cambodian Road Cut

PNOMPENH, Cambodia, Feb. 21 (Agence France-Presse) — Highway 1 between Pnompenh and Saigon was cut last night after Vietnamese Communists damaged a bridge about 35 miles southeast of the Cambodian capital, a spokesman said today.

Highway 1 is one of Pnompenh's few supply links with the outside world.